



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing  
Human Rights in Qatar

Tuesday, October 17, 2017

10:00 - 11:00 AM

2456 Rayburn House Office Building

**Raed Jarrar**

Advocacy Director, Middle East and North Africa

**Amnesty International USA**

[RJarrar@AIUSA.org](mailto:RJarrar@AIUSA.org)

Thank you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this briefing on human rights in Qatar and inviting me to comment.

Since June of this year, a serious political crisis has engulfed the Gulf States. Although Amnesty International doesn't take a position on the political dispute itself, we are deeply concerned about its human rights implications, especially on the following two fronts:

### **First: Tearing apart of families of mixed nationalities**

In June, sweeping measures were imposed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE in an arbitrary manner that violated the rights of families across the Gulf. Qataris living in other parts of the region were ordered to leave; and nationals of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE were ordered back home to Qatar.

With these measures, the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain have needlessly put mixed-nationality families at the heart of a political crisis.

Amnesty International has documented several cases of people cut off from their parents, children and spouses as a result of the June measures. One Qatari man told our researchers that he had lived in the UAE with his family for more than 10 years. As he tried to return home to Dubai from Doha, he was refused entry and sent back to Qatar, just after the measures were announced on June 5th. His wife is an Emirati national and was therefore forbidden from traveling to Qatar, and his children are Qatari nationals and were required to leave UAE. When he spoke to Amnesty International he had no idea when he would see them next. He told Amnesty International that he feared his employers in the UAE will dismiss him from his job since he cannot return and because of his nationality.

A Saudi Arabian man, who lived in Doha with his Qatari wife, told Amnesty International that he was unable to visit his mother, seriously ill in a hospital in Saudi Arabia, because if he did he would not be able to return to Qatar to be with his wife and children. He said, "If I go home, I can't see my wife. If I stay here, I can't see my mum."

Spouses should not be torn apart from one another, or children separated from their parents, because of a political dispute between governments. The crisis has also had significant impacts on the rights to education and work.

The governments of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE have made statements acknowledging the impact of their measures on mixed-nationality families and announced the establishment of emergency hot lines for affected individuals.

However, such a measure is clearly insufficient to address the human rights impact of such arbitrary, blanket measures. In any case, the experiences of those affected raise serious questions about whether these hot lines are providing effective advice or information. The hot lines have not been responsive, and Amnesty International is aware of many cases of people whose cases have not been resolved by them.

The US government should press the states imposing such measures to suspend arbitrary measures and ensure that people's human rights are not affected by political disagreements between states.

There are also concerns that migrant workers employed by Qatari nationals to look after their properties in Saudi Arabia may find themselves stranded, unable to return to Qatar where they have residence permits – and becoming undocumented in the process, at risk of exploitation or arrest and deportation.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states must protect any workers employed by Qatari nationals, including by facilitating the safe return of those who wish to return to their home countries or assisting those who wish to return to Qatar.

### **Second: Further restrictions on free expression by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain in the context of the political dispute**

Since June, residents in Saudi Arabia, UAE or Bahrain have been warned they could face harsh penalties if they make comments in support of Qatar.

Citing existing, flawed legal provisions, the UAE's general prosecutor announced in June that people who express "sympathy" for Qatar could face up to 15 years in jail; while state-controlled Saudi Arabian media stated that such expression could be considered a cybercrime offense.

The Bahraini Ministry of Interior also threatened anyone who shows "sympathy or favoritism" to the Qatari authorities either on or off line, with up to five years in prison and a fine under the Penal Code.

This is clearly a drastic violation of freedom of expression, both online and offline. Prosecuting anyone on this basis would be a clear violation of the right to freedom of expression. No one should be punished for peacefully expressing their views or criticizing government decisions.

The US government should take action by persuading the countries to immediately reverse these threats and end the ongoing crackdown on political speech and expression in these states.

### **Qatar's own violations of Human Rights:**

In addition to these violations by the Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain, Qatar's own record on human rights is marred with some violations. The authorities restrict freedom of expression, for example, with the independent news website DohaNews being blocked inside the country since December 2016. Mohamed al-Ajami, a Qatari poet, spent more than four years in prison for reciting a poem perceived to be critical of the ruling family, and was only released last year.

Although every Gulf state has a poor record on migrant labor, Qatar's response to heightened scrutiny over the situation of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in the context of the 2022 World Cup has not been adequate.

The root cause of abuse is the excessive control which Qatar's sponsorship system gives to employers. The perpetuation of this system will continue to drive abuses including forced labor and human trafficking, including of domestic workers.

Last year Qatar introduced a new sponsorship law claiming it "abolish[ed] kafala" (the sponsorship program). In fact, the new law retained many of the system's harshest features by allowing employers to prevent workers changing jobs for up to five years, and requiring workers to secure the permission of their employer to leave the country – the so-called "exit permit" system.

In November 2017 a complaint regarding Qatar's treatment of migrant workers will again be considered by the UN's International Labor Organization (ILO). The complaint against Qatar, which relates to forced labor and labor inspections, was brought by international trade unions in 2014, and the ILO's Governing Body has continued to scrutinize Qatar's labor rights record since that time.

In order to demonstrate to the ILO Governing Body that it is genuinely addressing forced labor, Qatar must commit to and carry out fundamental reforms, including providing migrant workers with the rights to change jobs and to leave the country without requiring their employer's permission.

Thank you again for giving me the chance to comment on this important topic. I look forward to answering your questions.