

US State Department human rights reports

Gulf allies: A record of repression and torture

Part 2: Qatar

Kate Randall
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The US State Department recently released its “2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.” This year’s annual report provides details on human rights conditions in over 190 countries. Included are reports on the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which represents the US-backed monarchies of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait.

This Saudi-dominated alliance backed the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, and has provided key support for the attack on Libya by the United States and European powers. The GCC has also provided military and police personnel to put down insurrections against the repressive regimes in Bahrain and Yemen.

While the US seeks to cloak its imperialist assault on Libya in “humanitarian” terms, its allies in the GCC are guilty of widespread violations of human rights and practice repression and torture in their own countries. This WSWS series examines these human rights abuses as documented in the State Department reports. This installment covers Qatar, which is one of only two Arab countries to back the attack on Libya, and is reportedly supplying arms to the “rebels”. For our report on Saudi Arabia, [click here](#).

Qatar is a constitutional monarchy, headed by Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. The emir exercises full executive power over Qatar’s population of approximately 1.7 million people.

Qatar has the world’s largest per capita production and proven reserves of both oil and natural gas, and in 2010 had the world’s highest gross domestic product per capita. The US maintains a strategic military presence in the emirate, which is home to both the US Central Command’s Forward Headquarters and the Combined Air Operations Center.

This wealth and US strategic support, however, has not translated into prosperity for the vast majority of Qataris. Foreigners and other non-citizens make up more than 85 percent of the population, and suffer discrimination and a lack of basic rights at an even higher level than Qatar’s citizens.

According to the introduction to the US State Department’s report on Qatar, the country’s people faced the following conditions in 2010:

“Citizens lacked the right to change the leadership of their government by election. There were prolonged detentions in crowded facilities, often ending with deportation. The government placed restrictions on civil liberties, including freedoms of speech, press (including the Internet), assembly, association, and religion. Foreign laborers faced restrictions on travel abroad.

“Trafficking in persons, primarily in the labor and domestic worker sectors, was a problem. Legal, institutional, and cultural discrimination against women limited their participation in society. The unresolved legal

status of ‘Bidoons’ (stateless persons with residency ties) resulted in discrimination against these noncitizens. Authorities severely restricted worker rights, especially for foreign laborers and domestic servants.”

Abusive detention and judicial practices

Sharia (Islamic law) is a primary source of legislation, and the government allows corporal punishment for certain criminal offenses. Documentation of government officials practicing torture or other “ill treatment” was limited, in part due to reluctance of alleged victims to come forward to make public claims of torture or abuse.

At least 18 people, mostly foreign nationals, were reportedly sentenced to flogging for offenses related to “illicit sexual relations” or alcohol consumption. In March 2010, a Doha court sentenced a police officer to one year in prison for intentionally burning an Indian citizen with cigarettes during a 2006 interrogation. Two months later a superior court suspended the penalty, “stating that it was the first time he committed such a crime and that he was unlikely to repeat the abuse,” according to the US State Department report.

Conditions in many prisons and detention centers did not meet international standards, and there were no monitoring visits by human rights observers during the year. Prisoners’ access to family and legal counsel was limited at the state security prison. Ombudsmen cannot serve on behalf of prisoners or detainees.

Under the Protection of Society and Combating Terrorism Law, authorities can detain individuals in the state security prison for indefinite periods. While criminal law requires that persons be served arrest warrants based on sufficient evidence and be charged within 24 hours and brought to court without undue delay, this anti-terrorism law provides an exception allowing for detention as long as two years, extendable indefinitely by the prime minister.

Although suspects are legally entitled to bail, it is granted infrequently and is more likely to be granted to citizens than non-citizens. The constitution provides for an independent jury, but the emir appoints all of the judges, who serve at his discretion. Three quarters of the judges were foreign nationals whose residency depended on permits granted by civil authorities.

While there are no separate Sharia courts, civil courts’ interpretation of Islamic law denied women equal status in proceedings such as marriage, divorce and custody. In such cases a woman’s testimony was equal to half that of a man’s.

High fees restrict the right of appeal. An appellant must often deposit

fees ranging from 5,000 riyals (\$1,375) to 20,000 riyals (\$5,500) to appeal, and these fees may be seized in whole or part if a court rejects the appeal.

Police must obtain a judicial warrant before entering a private residence or business, but such requirements are waived in cases involving national security. According to the report, "Police and security forces reportedly monitored telephone calls and emails. The government prohibits all political activity, including membership in political parties for citizens and noncitizens alike."

Denial of civil liberties

Freedoms of speech and of the press, while protected by the constitution, are denied in practice. Journalists and publishers routinely self-censor when reporting on government policies, or material deemed hostile to Islam or the ruling family. Editors did not allow the printing of the names of companies involved in labor disputes.

The 1979 Press and Publications Law provides for restrictions on publications deemed libelous or slanderous to Islam or the ruling family, with penalties ranging from criminal penalties, to prison sentences, or confiscation of assets of the publication.

Qatar's seven daily newspapers, though nominally privately owned, are operated by members of the ruling family or by proprietors with close ties to government officials. Local news vendors quoted by the report said that Egyptian newspapers such as *al-Ahram* "were critical of Qatar and were occasionally censored or not allowed in the country."

The Qatar Radio and Television Corporation and customs officials routinely practice censorship, and state-owned television and radio adhere to the government's views. Films are censored for political, religious, sexual and language content.

Doha-based Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language satellite television network, focuses on international news and avoids coverage of Qatar issues. The government claims the channel is independent, but exercises control over the station through funding and selection of its management.

There are an estimated 145,800 Internet subscribers in Qatar, and some 40 percent of the country's population uses the Internet. The government censors the Internet "for political, religious, and pornographic content through a proxy server, which monitored and blocked web sites, email, and chat rooms through the state-owned Internet service provider," according to the State Department.

To hold a public meeting or demonstration, organizers must obtain a permit from the director general of public security at the Ministry of the Interior. Such public gatherings are extremely rare.

The constitution does allow for the formation of groups called "professional societies," which must meet strict regulations and are barred from engaging in political activities. The Ministry of Social Affairs can deny their establishment if they are deemed a threat to the public interest.

These societies must have 10 million riyals (\$2.7 million) in capital funds to be registered. They must also pay exorbitant fees: \$50,000 riyals (\$13,740) for licensing and 10,000 riyals (\$2,750) annually in other fees.

Islam is the state religion, and other religions are prohibited from public practice. According to the criminal code, individuals or groups caught proselytizing on behalf of any religion other than Islam can be sentenced to a prison term of up to 10 years.

In June 2010, an Irish woman was sentenced to seven years in prison following her conviction for insulting the Koran in a September 2009 incident at the women's mosque at Doha International Airport. Authorities claimed the woman threw the Koran on the floor; she denied all charges and said she dropped the Koran by accident.

The constitution provides for freedom of movement within the country, foreign travel, emigration and repatriation. These rights are routinely denied in practice. Under the Protection of Society and Combating Terrorism Law, the government may prevent some citizens from traveling abroad. A 2009 law bars employers from withholding workers' passports, but the practice continues.

Qatar is not a signatory to either the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, and the government has no established system for providing protection or status to refugees. The Nationality Law allows for a maximum of only 50 noncitizen residents per year to apply for citizenship after residing in Qatar for *25 consecutive years*.

Lack of representation, political rights

There is no right for Qatari citizens to change their national government through elections. The emir appoints a 35-member Advisory Council and cabinet and passes down his rule through the male branch of the al-Thani family.

The 29-member Central Municipal Council is the only elected political body. Eligible voters must be 21 years old and their families must have resided in the country *prior to 1930*. In June 2010, the emir postponed elections to the council for the second time since 2008.

Rights of women and children

Qatari law criminalizes rape, but does not address spousal rape. Domestic violence is widespread and rape is underreported, largely due to victims' fear of social stigma.

A 2007 Qatar University study found that 63 percent of 2,778 surveyed citizen and noncitizen female students reported they had been victims of physical abuse. Of these, 52 percent reported "strong violence," such as rape; 50 percent reported they had contemplated suicide due to fear of repercussions from authorities if they reported the crimes against them.

The law provides leniency for a man found guilty of committing an "honor" crime. There were frequent reports of employer sponsors sexually harassing and mistreating foreign domestic servants, but most of these workers did not press charges out of fear they would lose their jobs.

Citizenship is derived solely from the father. The children of noncitizen fathers are therefore stateless and have no access to state services such as health care and education.

Human trafficking

Qatar is a destination country for men and women subjected to trafficking in persons, specifically forced labor, and to a lesser extent, prostitution.

Men and women from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Sudan, Thailand, Egypt, Syria, Jordan and China who voluntarily travel to Qatar as laborers and domestic servants often subsequently face conditions amounting to involuntary servitude.

While slavery is criminalized under law in Qatar, penalties for

trafficking crimes are minimal—up to six months' imprisonment for employing forced labor.

Discrimination against minorities

The government discriminates against the country's close to 1.5 million noncitizens in areas of employment, education, housing and health services. Noncitizens are required to pay for health care, electricity, water and education, while these services are provided free of charge to citizens.

Law prohibits same-sex relations between men. HIV-positive foreigners are deported; HIV-positive citizens are quarantined and receive treatment.

Lack of workers' rights

Labor law allows for the organization of workers in only one union: the General Union of Workers of Qatar. Government sector workers are prohibited from joining a union. Foreign workers can only be members of joint labor-management committees. There were no reported attempts by workers to form unions in 2010.

Strikes are not allowed at public utilities or at health or security service facilities. Civil servants and domestic workers are banned from striking. Strikes must be approved by three fourths of a company's workers' committee, which is comprised of an equal number of representatives from management and labor, making the likelihood of a legal strike all but nonexistent.

Last September 23, police arrested about 90 foreign workers at the al-Badar construction company when they went on strike. Management had refused to increase workers' salaries by 10 percent as stipulated in their contract, and instead cut their pay by 35 percent, from about \$1,000 riyals (\$275) a month to 650 riyals (\$180). All of the workers were jailed and deported.

There is no minimum wage in Qatar. The US State Department report determined that the median wage of noncitizen workers did not provide a decent standard of living for these workers and their families.

While labor law calls for a 48-hour work week with a 24-hour rest period, these regulations were often violated with respect to unskilled laborers, construction workers and domestic servants. Such workers often work seven days a week and more than 12 hours a day with few or no holidays and no overtime pay.

To be continued



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