

How International Law is Applied to Human Rights Challenges in the Gulf States

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Introduction

Human rights are one of the most important parts of international law. Violations of these rights are often held to a high standard throughout international law, but there are certainly cases where this is bypassed. A large number of human rights challenges take place in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The Gulf Cooperation Council consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, and it is a political and economic council established in 1981 to protect the Arab peninsula from foreign threats (Al Jazeera 2017). This council of states works together to promote their economic and security goals in relation to each other and other states internationally. By promoting the state's good, they can sometimes overlook individual rights whether they are civil and political rights or economic and social rights. By overlooking these human rights, there is a direct violation of international human rights law. Each state violates different laws, and they are party to different international law principles. As shown in the table below, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are ratified to several treaties under the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. By being ratified to these treaties, they are legally obligated to protect human rights. These treaties along with other international principles make up the foundation for international human rights law. Every state in the international system should have their constitution formed around the ideas in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. This was the first human rights focused principle in international law, and it has later had effects on customary international law and forming treaties (Scott 2017, 241). It is expected that member states of the United Nations will follow these international principles regarding human rights. To further explore these human rights challenges, this paper will compare the international human rights law challenges in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar specifically revolving around freedom of speech, gender rights, and workers rights.

International Human Rights Law Treaties by State

Qatar	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
-Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) -International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) -Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) -International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) -International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)	-Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) -Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) -International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) -Conventions on the Rights of the Child (CRC) -Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	-Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) -Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) -International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) -Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) -Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

-Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)		
-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)		

This table shows the human rights treaties that are ratified by each state. These treaties are all considered to be the core of international human rights law. By being ratified to these treaties, states are obligated to protect the rights listed.

Freedom of Speech Violations in Each State

Each of the Gulf Cooperation Council states have had histories of freedom of speech and expression violations. As shown above, the Gulf States have ratified several human rights treaties, but in regards to freedom of speech, the treaties that are ratified are limited. Only Qatar has ratified the ICCPR which directly protects freedoms of speech while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has no treaties directly protecting freedoms of speech and this is shown in practice by the amount of violations in each state.

Qatar violates freedom of speech principles while being partied to several treaties that protect freedom of speech. By being signed on and ratified to these treaties, Qatar is under obligation to value these human rights. Freedom of speech is violated in Qatar through political views, media, and religious identity. Under the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights, states should protect individuals' rights to self determination, expression, religion, assembly, and participation in public affairs. Qatar falls short on several of these protections. Media is censored heavily, and journalists are at risk of being jailed for any form of political dissent. Qatar has strict laws on "false news" within the media which is now punishable by 5 years in prison and a payment of 100,000 Qatari riyals, or 27,350 USD (Human Rights Watch 2020). It is important to note that the law does not tell how to differentiate fake news and the truth. For example in 2019 Abdullah Ibhaish, a Jordan national, was arrested and sentenced to five years. He was accused of bribery after advocating for migrant workers at World Cup construction sites (ECDHR n.d). In this case and many others, Qatar violated the ICCPR's right to a fair trial and freedom of expression. Overall freedom of expression is limited in Qatar through lack of religious and political expression. While according to the Qatar constitution, everyone has a right to their own religious practices, Qatar does not allow public worship outside of Islam (Freedom House 2025). This violates Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. With many examples of Qatar choosing to violate international treaties, there are several freedom of speech violations that are worth noting. These violations in regard to politics, media, and religion are all illegal in international law.

Saudi Arabia is also partied to several human rights treaties, but Saudi Arabia has not ratified any of the treaties in the International Bill of Human Rights (OHCHR n.d.). The International Bill of Human Rights consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Culture Rights. Not being partied to any of these bodies allows for much more range in terms of freedom of speech violations. Saudi Arabia is known for being restrictive when it comes to freedoms of speech. There are several cases in recent years where politics and media have been



heavily censored to favor the government. One case that stands out is the death of Jamal Khashoggi. Khashoggi was a Saudi journalist who was murdered at the Saudi Arabia Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. He was killed by Saudi nationals with evidence pointing to the murder being ordered by the Saudi Arabia Prince, Muhammed Bin Salman. Khashoggi was known for having strong opinions against the royal family, and he was a strong advocate for democracy (Vick et al, 2018) . This incident violated customary international law and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Killing anyone because of their beliefs or public opinions is against basic international law principles. In more general cases, any political activist can be jailed or harmed due to their beliefs. Media is heavily censored in Saudi Arabia, and all media is run through the government (Freedom House 2025). Religion is heavily controlled as well. Any public practice of any religion besides Sunni Muslim is prohibited. Shi'a Muslims face discrimination in nearly every aspect of their lives (Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain 2025). While the majority of discrimination is towards people outside of Sunni Islam, there are controls within Sunni Muslim as well. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia uses religion as a way to force compliance with the government. These challenges of freedom violate customary international law in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. All states should protect the freedom of religion and freedom from religious coercion, but in the case of Saudi Arabia, it is not legally binding.

The United Arab Emirates, similarly to Saudi Arabia, has not ratified any treaties that directly protect freedom of speech. Compared to Saudi Arabia, the UAE has less freedom of speech challenges, but they are still present. In politics, opinions are suppressed especially with the country's foreign policy. In the summer of 2024, the UAE arrested and deported many people that were critical of Israel's attack on Gaza. The UAE has supported Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so they will not allow for any opposition. A Jordanian national working in Dubai was deported without due process for making a social media post in support of Palestine (Targeted News Service 2024). The right to a fair trial is protected by the United Arab Emirates' constitution and many principles of international law (Generis Global 2024). Media is regulated in all forms, but it is especially monitored in journalism. The government controls all media and ensures that no false or opposing information is being published (Freedom House 2025). The United Arab Emirates has set standards for public media which must respect Islam, refrain from publishing false media, and respect the culture and government of the UAE (The United Arab Emirates' Government Portal 2024). Laws such as UAE Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2021 state that any rumor or false statement online is forbidden, but the law is sometimes vague. These crimes can be punishable by up to a year just for not holding these standards (Emirates News Agency 2022). According to the Freedom House, individuals are free to practice any religion, but blasphemy is illegal according to Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2023. This law protects all rights to religions and criminalizes discrimination towards any religion. The United Arab Emirates overall, has some serious violations of freedom of speech, but due to its law numbers of ratifications of treaties, it is not subject to legal trouble.

Gender Rights Violations in Each State

Gender discrimination has been present throughout global society for centuries, and it is certainly still an issue amongst all of the world. The Gulf States are not exempt from this despite each of these states having ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination



Against Women. While gender rights apply to many different people, the issues of women are the most common especially in the Gulf States. These rights consist of civil and political rights, economic and social rights, and rights revolving around reproduction, marriage, and sexual relations. An issue amongst all of the gulf states that revolves around all of these rights is the Guardianship program. This program is based around an ideology that women should not make any decisions for themselves without the permission of a male guardian. In most cases, women cannot work, go to school, drive, or use their income without the permission of a guardian (BBC News 2019). Along with this, there are many other women's rights that are violated in each Gulf States.

Gender rights in Qatar are protected by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, but there are still a number of challenges to this convention. Articles 7, 8, and 9 of CEDAW protect women's rights to vote, participate in government, represent their nation, and hold national citizenship. In most cases, all of these rights are protected in Qatar. Women can vote and participate in government, but participation amongst women is still low. Only 4.4% of Qatar's parliament is women (UN Women n.d.). In 2021, there was an election held for the Shura council which is Qatar's legislative body. In this election, women could vote, but in general only a small number of Qatar's population could vote. The only people eligible to vote were people that had ancestral ties to Qatar from the 1930s (Mills and Barrington 2021). Economic and Social rights are subject to obstacles because of the presence of the guardianship program in Qatar. Qatar's guardianship program holds that any unmarried woman under 25 years old must get permission from a male guardian in order to travel, attend school, work, or move. Once a woman is married, that guardianship is passed to her husband. This creates many issues for women, and can lead to furthering issues of violence or control of men towards women. Another common issue with this is healthcare. In most cases, women cannot receive treatment without their guardian's consent, especially reproductive health care (Human Rights Watch 2021). The guardianship program and all violations of women's freedom of choice violates several articles of CEDAW. Articles 11, 15, and 16 are all violated by the instances stated above. Women are granted the right to choose their own path of marriage, education, and reproductive health. Article 16 protects the right of women to marry freely which is widely not respected in Qatar since all women must get permission to enter a marriage (Freedom House 2025). Gender rights as they are stated in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are often violated in Qatar.

Saudi Arabia is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which makes it legally binding for Saudi Arabia to protect gender rights. Civil and Political rights have recently improved in the kingdom due to a reform in 2015. In 2015 women were not only given the right to vote, but they could also run for office (Euro Group Consulting n.d.). Women are not elected as much as men, and there are currently 30 women members out of the total 151 in the Shura Council (IPU Parline n.d.). This does not violate CEDAW because the Saudi government has taken all appropriate measures to ensure political participation of women. Economic and social rights are still violated in several ways. Gender-segregation is still present in most parts of society, especially education and the workforce. This causes issues with women's opportunities as they do not have access to the same resources as men. This violates articles 10 and 11 of CEDAW which states that women must have equal opportunity and access to education and employment. Women are also only allowed

to take certain jobs, and they are often limited to what their guardian allows them to do. Similarly to Qatar, the guardianship program is still present in Saudi Arabia, and it controls various aspects of life. While many things are still under control, recent reforms have allowed women over 21 to make their own decisions about healthcare, education, and most employment. Women must still get their guardian's permission to marry, divorce, and take certain jobs (Carr-Ellis 2025). Under article 16 of CEDAW, women are given the right to enter into a marriage freely and make their own decisions about the marriage. This convention also protects the right of women to freely get divorced. Women can get divorced in Saudi Arabia, but men have much more say over the matter than women do. Divorce is almost always on the grounds of negotiation for women while men can divorce unilaterally (Human Rights Watch 2021). Saudi Arabia has certainly seen reforms and improvements, but there are still major violations of international human rights law.

The United Arab Emirates, like both Qatar and Saudi Arabia, has also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. While being party to this convention, the UAE still violates many of the principles within it. Political participation of women is notable with 50 percent of the Federal National Council being women (The United Arab Emirates' Government Portal n.d.). All citizens of the UAE are eligible to vote, and women's votes are counted the same as men. While political rights for women are quite strong, economic rights are not. The guardianship program, like in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is still present and controls women's right to travel, work, and marry. In order for a woman to marry, she must get permission to do so (Nagesh 2021). This violates article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Due to these restrictions, women also face economic discrimination. Women are not able to get the same jobs as men, and in most cases, inheritance laws favor male relatives over women (Freedom House 2025). Under CEDAW, the UAE has chosen to reserve some of the articles due to Islamic belief. Articles 2 and 16 are both a part of these reserves which would protect women from forced marriage and protect the right to inheritance (International Federation for Human Rights 2010). Many of these reservations make it hard to protect human rights in international law.

Workers Rights Violations in Each State

The issue in Gulf States that is focused on the most is worker's rights challenges. The GCC is notorious for having a lack of or very weak protections when it comes to worker's rights especially for migrant workers. Most of these challenges come from the Kafala System. The Kafala System is used in each Gulf State besides two, and it is the system that gives migrant workers visas and residence permits in order for them to work in the Gulf state under a private sector. In this program, in most cases, the employer will take full financial and legal responsibility over the worker. This system originally began as a way to minimize security concerns within each of the states, but Kafala has led to notable human rights violations. There are a number of issues that have surfaced in each state (Roper and Barria 2014, 34). While migrant workers face the majority of the struggles, domestic workers in the private sector are also subject to harsh working conditions. The International Labor Organization (ILO) works to protect these rights and has a number of conventions that help to ensure that labor rights are being followed. The table below shows the International Labor Organization conventions that

each state has in force. Along with the ILO conventions, several of these states have also ratified treaties or conventions that protect other rights that are overlooked by these states.

ILO Conventions by State

Qatar	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
-Forced Labor (C029) -Abolition of Forced Labor (C105) -Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (C111) -Minimum Age (C138) -Worst Forms of Child Labor (C182) -Labor Inspection (C081)	-Forced Labor (C029) -Equal Remuneration (C100) -Abolition of Forced Labor (C105) Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (C111) -Minimum Age (C138) -Worst Forms of Child Labor (C182) -Labor Inspection (C081) -Hours of Work (Industry) (C001) -Weekly Rest (Industry) (C014) -Hours of Work (Commerce and Offices) (C030) -Night Work (Women) (C089) -Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) (C090) -Protection of Wages (C095) -Weekly Rest (Commerce and Offices) (C106) -Hygiene (Commerce and Offices) (C120) -Minimum Age (Underground Work) (C123)	-Forced Labor Convention (C029) -Equal Remuneration Convention (C100) -Abolition of Forced Labor Convention (C105) -Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (C111) -Minimum Age Convention (C138) -Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (C182) -Labor Inspection Convention (C081) -Hours of Work (Industry) Convention (C001) -Night Work (Women) Convention (C089)

	-Prevention of Major Industrial Accidents (C174)	
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This table shows the conventions of the International Labor Organization that are ratified in each state. The International Labor Organization is a UN Agency that works to protect labor rights by setting standards, building conventions, and holding conferences. Each of these conventions establishes a right and the state obligation to enforce it.

Qatar has a number of worker's rights challenges while being party to conventions that protect nationals from harsh treatment and protect civil, political, economic, social, and various forms of labor rights. Worker's rights violations are mostly towards migrant workers in the public sector. Migrant workers currently make up 91 percent of Qatar's population (Human Rights Watch 2024). Challenges revolve around economic and political freedoms, the right to movement, and the right to favorable work and living conditions. Economically, workers do not have much power, and they are often unpaid or their pay does not cover the high costs to live in Qatar. In 2022, Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup which caused many migrant workers to face physical harm, go unpaid, and even die due to the harsh conditions on worksites. In order to host the World Cup, Qatar built an entire city consisting of hotels, metro systems, stadiums, and an airport which required intense labor of thousands of migrant workers. As of 2021, preparing for the World Cup took the lives of at least 6,500 migrant workers (BBC News 2022). The workers that survived were often injured, put in unfavorable living conditions, or they had their passports confiscated. Passport confiscation is just one of many tactics used to ensure that migrant workers cannot leave their jobs. Absconding is a crime, meaning that workers cannot leave their employers without permission. There have been recent reforms to allow workers to leave the country, but the enforcement of these practices is weak (Human Rights Watch 2025). With many other reforms and conventions, the enforcement is not present in protecting worker's rights in Qatar, violating many aspects of international law. The Forced Labor Convention of the International Labor Organization holds that the state should enforce laws that ensure labor is voluntary. By forcing workers to work and not allowing them to quit, this convention is violated. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights protects the rights to choose work, favorable work conditions, and adequate living conditions which as stated above have all been violated.

Saudi Arabia has ratified 16 Conventions of the International Labor Organization making it much more liable for its labor rights challenges. Compared to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia has much less migrant workers with 42 percent of their population being migrant workers. Due to Saudi Arabia's strict laws on freedom of expression, trade unions are also strictly prohibited making it nearly impossible for migrant workers to advocate for themselves (Human Rights Watch 2024). Migrant and domestic workers are forced to work 16 hour work days in unfavorable conditions with low wages (Country Review). The amount of hours in industry is determined by the Hours of Labor Convention, and it states that no worker should exceed eight hours per day or forty hours per week without compensation or agreement between worker and employer. This also applies under the Commerce and Offices Convention. Similar to Qatar, Saudi Arabia is preparing to host the FIFA World Cup in 2034. In preparation for this the Saudi government is planning to build new infrastructure and put forth its new Vision 2030. Vision 2030 aims to strengthen their influence in the Arab and Islamic worlds, strengthen



the economy, and build trade globally. In this Vision, the government claims to have intentions to create better working conditions for all Saudi workers and to attract “foreign minds” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia n.d.). In practice, Vision 2030 has created harsher working conditions for workers. Although the conditions are harsh, the lower number of migrant workers allows for less to be reported, and most of the human rights struggles do not violate the conventions that Saudi Arabia has ratified.

The United Arab Emirates’ population is made up of mostly migrant workers and their families. 88 percent of the UAE’s population are migrants and the workforce is made up of 96 percent migrants. Having ratified 9 conventions that specifically protect workers rights, the United Arab Emirates is obligated to protect the rights of these workers. While each emirate has its own laws and regulations, workers’ treatment is mostly nationwide. Economic issues are some of the most common violations with wages going unpaid or low. Having low incomes or unfair pay violates the Equal Remuneration Convention which protects workers right to pay that covers how much they work. In most Gulf states, and especially the UAE the costs to apply for recruitment and fines for overstaying visas are incredibly expensive. Due to the low income, these are very hard to pay back and can cause more trouble (Integral Human Development n.d.). Trade unions are not permitted in the UAE, and any form of dissent can lead to arrest or deportation. Movement is restricted causing workers to be stuck in harsh working environments. Passports are commonly withheld, and if they aren’t, leaving an employer is punishable. In most cases, under the kafala system, workers do not get to choose their location, employer, or type of work (Freedom House 2025). These all violate the Forced Labor Convention which states that work must be entirely voluntary. The Abolition of Forced Labor Convention protects the right of workers to conduct a strike and organize trade unions which is also not permitted in the UAE. These rights should be protected under international law in the United Arab Emirates.

International Legal Actions: What Has Been Done to Stop These Violations?

There are reported and undeniable violations of human rights in the Gulf States, but is anything being done to stop it? There is little that can be done to actually enforce legal protections for human rights in the Gulf states. Most of the efforts have been through special procedures, diplomacy, and universal periodic review. Even when the treaties are in place in the Gulf states, there is little action that can be done to ensure that there are improvements. Independent experts and special rapporteurs can advise countries through what is called a Special Procedure. These procedures can be helpful but only if the state is willing to open up the dialogue. The states can receive advice on how to improve conditions (UN Sustainable Development Group 2025). Universal Periodic Reviews can be very successful when a state is willing to take the appropriate steps to improve. UPRs are a process where the human rights are reviewed, the state is given recommendations, and then another review is done to evaluate the progress (United Nations Development Programme 2012). While this can be very successful, change can only be made if the state is willing to implement the advice. For example, the United Arab Emirates had its fourth UPR in May of 2023 and received 323 recommendations. These recommendations consisted of many things including the recommendation to ratify the ICCPR (MENA Rights Group 2023). Along with these, another strategy to improve human rights has

been diplomacy and regional influence. The Arab Charter on Human Rights exists to promote human rights, but so far it has not been successful in enforcing human rights. The same goes for diplomatic relations. Western states have not put any incentive out to encourage the Gulf States to protect human rights.

Conclusion

Human rights in the Gulf states are not always protected leading to many violations of international law. International law allows states to be held accountable for human rights challenges, but as shown with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, it is possible for states to overlook these rights. With the Gulf states especially, industry and the economy usually take priority over rights, but religion does as well. Many of these states will set reservations within treaties and conventions to avoid having to protect rights that may not align with their religious beliefs. Due to loopholes like this and the lack of enforcement within international law, it becomes difficult to hold states accountable for violations of international law and human rights. These three states have a number of international human rights law violations in several areas, and the international community will continue to hold them accountable and push for more reform on human rights.

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS RESEARCH LAB

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The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.

