

# Congress of the United States

## Washington, DC 20515

August 1, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington D.C., 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

Thank you for your work protecting human rights around the world. We write today to follow up on a 2020 letter sent to your predecessor and request that you encourage member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) —Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates— to address the prevalence of human trafficking within their borders. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 defines severe human trafficking as not only sex trafficking but also “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery”.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic brought increased attention to the mistreatment of migrant workers in Gulf countries, as highlighted by Amnesty International, which has stated that these abuses can no longer be overlooked.<sup>2</sup> These abuses were further highlighted by the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. It is imperative that the U.S. government urges member states of the GCC to tackle the fundamental issues that contribute to human trafficking in their region.

The GCC member states employ the Kafala sponsorship system, which links migrant workers' visa status directly to their employment contracts. This system, widely criticized by many organizations as a contemporary form of slavery, has enabled widespread labor exploitation, from wage theft to delayed payments to forms of direct abuse. Reports from several organizations have also uncovered restrictions on freedom of movement and working conditions that resemble slavery. Moreover, migrant workers face the prospect of incarceration or expulsion if they attempt to leave their jobs without their employer's (or sponsor's) consent. Although some GCC nations have initiated certain reforms, the Kafala system requires substantial overhaul, with many arguing that it should be abolished entirely.

The plight of domestic workers, especially women and girls, is reprehensible. While these abuses may be legislated against, little has been done to combat the exploitations in practice. In 2019, the BBC uncovered the case of domestic workers advertised for sale online in Kuwait, described by a UN Special Rapporteur as “online slave markets.”<sup>3</sup> Kuwait has rejected recommendations to join treaties on the rights of migrant workers and refugees. The country's

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State. Trafficking In Persons (TIP) report. June 2023, pp. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International. “COVID-19 makes Gulf countries' abuse of migrant workers impossible to ignore.” April 30, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/covid19-makes-gulf-countries-abuse-of-migrant-workers-impossible-to-ignore/>

<sup>3</sup> BBC. October 31, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50228549>

government furthermore rejected a recommendation to repeal its Kafala system.<sup>4</sup> The latest Department of State Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Interim Assessment in of February 2024 states that Kuwait does not “make efforts to prosecute or convict traffickers [or] proactively screen vulnerable populations.”<sup>5</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, the Kafala system ensures that a migrant worker cannot leave the country without permission from their sponsor, paving the way for exploitative practices. One such example is the case of Ahmed Abdul Majeed, an Indian national who was forced – without pay – to recover dues owed by his company’s clients for 6 months, a company owned by the Saudi Crown.<sup>6</sup> He was repeatedly denied the ability to leave the country despite multiple requests to tend to the declining health of his wife, ultimately paying the company dues out of his own pocket in order to finally return home. The government also continues to “fine, jail, and/or deport migrant workers for prostitution or immigration violations,” pertaining to cases of unidentified victims of labor or sex trafficking.<sup>7</sup> The TIP report further asserts that Saudi Arabia’s Kafala system has “continued to exacerbate trafficking vulnerabilities in the large migrant worker communities.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, Saudi Arabia also increased penalties and taxations imposed on migrant workers.

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), efforts to eliminate some of the worst examples of trafficking have been undertaken – the 2023 TIP report indicates that the UAE government is “reporting the number of alleged trafficking cases investigated for the first time since 2012, including labor trafficking cases” and “prosecuting and convicting more traffickers, including labor traffickers,” while expanding enrollment in its wage protection system (WPS). However, the UAE is still guilty of significant human trafficking abuses – the TIP report also highlighted that they do not screen vulnerable populations for indicators of trafficking and persists in excluding most domestic workers from the WPS. Critically, they also treat violations of anti-trafficking provisions as administrative errors rather than prosecuting them as crimes. This substantially weakens accountability for perpetrators and must change.<sup>8</sup>

The 2022 World Cup in Qatar has been one of the most high-profile recent examples of Gulf state human trafficking. Members of Congress, including some of us on this letter, sent a letter to FIFA President Gianni Infantino in September 2022 highlighting the horrific state of migrant workers in Qatar, from the nearly 7,000 worker deaths to rampant wage theft to cruel and unjust working conditions and inhumane housing. Unfortunately, these issues did not cease with the World Cup; a Human Rights Watch report in June 2023 found that Qatari authorities had “failed to provide compensation for widespread abuses, including wage theft and unexplained deaths of migrant workers who prepared and delivered the tournament.”<sup>9</sup> Despite its

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<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International. July 16, 2020 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1726722020ENGLISH.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Department of State, Report to Congress on 2024 Trafficking in Persons Interim Assessment Pursuant to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, February 6, 2024 <https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-2024-trafficking-in-persons-interim-assessment-pursuant-to-the-trafficking-victims-protection-act/>

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Foundation, August 2023, <https://hrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Saudi-Arabias-Human-Trafficking-Mechanisms-Report.pdf>, page 23

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State. Trafficking In Persons (TIP) report. 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/saudi-arabia/>

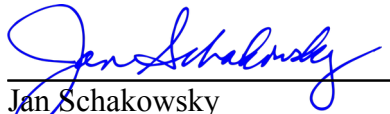
<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State. Trafficking In Persons (TIP) report. June 2023. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/united-arab-emirates/>

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, June 16, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/16/qatar-six-months-post-world-cup-migrant-workers-suffer>

object failure to improve working conditions or deliver justice for the thousands of migrant workers who reside there, Qatar was also elected head of the International Labor Conference in June 2023.

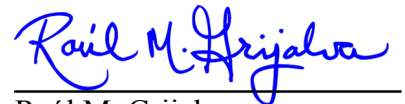
We believe that the quest to end human trafficking in the Gulf region cannot be achieved without legal protections, significant improvements to gender equality, labor rights for migrant workers, and complete reform or abolition of the Kafala system. We write to express our concern that the conditions of migrant workers and the systemic labor rights violations are not “significant efforts” toward meeting TVPA minimum standards, especially due to continued lack of incentive by these GCC governments to abolish and replace the Kafala system with a rights-based labor law system. For this reason, we ask that the Tier designations prioritize efforts that address these systemic root causes of trafficking in GCC member states, specifically the Kafala sponsorship system itself. We call on you to take the appropriate diplomatic means to encourage GCC member states to combat human trafficking by systematically improving gender equality and migrant labor rights. We ask that the U.S. government emphasize that this pursuit cannot fully be realized until the Kafala system has undergone complete reform or is abolished in its entirety.

Sincerely,




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Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress




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Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress



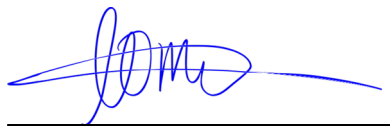
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Eleanor Holmes Norton  
Member of Congress




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James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress



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Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress



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Jamie Raskin  
Member of Congress



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Andre Carson  
Member of Congress