

Topic A: The used of forced labor to develop the tourism industry in the Middle East



UNWTO

World Tourism Organization

I. Committee Background

The UNWTO (The UN World Tourism Organization) was first conceived as the International Union of Official Travel Organizations after the First International Congress of National Tourism Bodies elected to create an international and non-governmental organization in 1946. The organization gained UN consultative status in 1948. In 1975, following increased integration and activity within the UN, the IUOTO is re-designated as the UNWTO, and its first general assembly is hosted in Madrid. Robert Lonati was voted in as the first secretary general of the UNWTO, and established its headquarters in Madrid.

The purpose of the UNWTO is to promote sustainable and continuous growth in the tourism industry of member-states, while also ensuring that tourism practices uphold an ethical code, limit their impact on the environment, and respect the local cultures and traditions of each country. Overall, the main purpose of growing the global tourism industry is to boost the economic growth of countries by stimulating their markets with foreign input. The main activities of the UNWTO are to help members address the education/training needs of their tourism industry, to create plans for individual markets based on statistics and trends, to aid with a member's marketing strategy, and to provide frameworks that guide national policies. An example of a UNWTO action is the UNWTO Roadmap for Recovery developed in 2009 after the 2008 Great Recession. The Roadmap provides members with a list of actions and considerations, in relation to policies and international relations, that should be taken to maximize growth in the tourism industry.

II. History of the Topic

In the early 1900s to approximately the 1930s, swathes of Middle Eastern countries began discovering oil reservoirs that brought economic prosperity to the gulf states. Due to the small populations of the gulf states, there weren't enough domestic firms and domestic workers to satisfy the growing demand for infrastructure. Many infrastructure projects were aimed at providing services to the population that could previously not be given to the public due to a lack of wealth and resources. Such projects that required man-power included dams,

irrigation systems, desalination plants, transport systems and sewage systems. This led Middle Eastern countries to drastically increase the number of migrant workers operating in each country throughout the 1950s. Originally, employers who acted as sponsors of the worker's residency permits were used to provide protection and guidance to migrant workers who did not know the local language or culture and, thus, were vulnerable. This worked under a new version of the 'kafala' system, which originated in the 1920s in the Bahrain pearl diving industry and utilized debts to entrap workers. The system of debt for entrapment was replaced, however, by the right to work in the country via sponsorship. The focus of employers quickly shifted from protecting migrant workers to exploiting them by using the sizeable power imbalance. In the 1970s, migrant workers began outnumbering domestic workers, seeing a 13% annual national growth of migrant workers between 1975 and 1985 (according to Comparative Migration Studies). Since then, the percent of migrant workers representing the labor force in Middle Eastern countries is only growing. However, the number of human rights abuses has also grown.

III. Current Issues

Forced labor in the tourism industry and in industry as a whole in the Middle East is quite prevalent in the modern day. The majority of the people who are inducted into forced labor are migrant workers. These migrant workers mostly travel to the Middle East from low income countries throughout Asia, Africa, and from the poorest of Middle Eastern countries. According to estimates by the International Organization for Migration, the leading country of origin for migrant workers is India with "3.2 million persons," followed by Pakistan, Egypt and Yemen. There are approximately 7.5 million Asians and 3.5 million non-gulf Arabs working as migrant workers. These migrant workers represent a large percentage of the labor force throughout many nations in the region. According to UN statistics: "In Qatar... 94 per cent of workers are migrants, while in Saudi Arabia that figure is over 50 per cent." The UN also finds that migrant workers also make-up a large percentage of the labor force in Jordan and Lebanon in particular, while the U.S Department of State also found that "90% of the UAE's residents are foreign workers." Many of these migrant workers are granted entry into a Middle Eastern country under the condition that they follow a system labelled the 'Kafala'

system, which is a form of sponsorship system where a migrant worker must be sponsored by their in-country employer in order to receive travel documentation and the legal right to stay in the country. The worker also does not have the power to terminate their contract unless their employer is in agreement. Migrant workers who do not follow their contractual obligations are subsequently deported from the country. This gives employers a position of absolute authority and control over migrant workers' lives and work. Due to the power employers have over migrant workers, many human rights abuses often take place with no intervention or oversight from government bodies. These include the confiscation of travel documentation from workers to force them to stay in the country and work, the manipulation of work hours without the worker's input, and the removal of the worker's right to freely move. Other common abuses range from poor working conditions to sexual exploitation. Many countries of origin for migrant workers, such as Indonesia, Nepal and Kenya have placed emigration bans on certain Middle Eastern countries for their treatment of migrant workers, though these bans seem to provoke an increase in human smuggling.

One of the major industries that these migrant workers operate in is the construction industry, including the construction of touristic attractions and facilities. An example of a recent incident involving the tourism industry and exploited migrant workers is the reconstruction of the Khalifa stadium for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The event itself saw over 1 million visitors arriving to Qatar from around the world and neighbouring countries. The World Cup event is estimated to have earned Qatar approximately "\$2.3-4.1 billion" according to members of the International Monetary Fund. Overall, the money earned in gross value accounted for nearly 1 percent of Qatar's total GDP in 2022. In 2023, Travel and Tourism contributions to GDP grew by 31%, to represent 10.3% of Qatar's total economic output. This demonstrates how the migrant workers' role in the tourism industry in Qatar has made a significant impact. However, the migrant workers involved suffered a variety of abuses. Amnesty International found reports of: "squalid and cramped accommodation, large recruitment fees, workers receiving less money than their contractual salary, employers confiscating travel documents such as passports and residence permits, and receiving threats." In addition, poor working conditions led to the deaths of a reported 37 migrant workers. Associated committees claimed, however, that 34 of those deaths were non-work related. Since the World Cup, over 6,500 more migrant workers have died in Qatar. Though

Qatar has since officially abolished the Kafala system following publicity from the World Cup, many reports claim that efforts to enforce the abolishment have been insufficient and that human rights abuses persist as before, stemming from the reliance of Qatar's economy and labor force on migrant workers.

Abuse of migrant workers also occurred during the Dubai Expo 2020. Dubai's economy is one of the most heavily reliant on tourism in the world. The Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing has stated that tourism contributes to over 10% of Dubai's GDP in the modern-day. In 2021 (the year Dubai Expo 2020 was hosted due to Covid-19 related delays), the Accommodation and Food Services sector grew by 38.2% following a sharp decrease during the height of Covid-19. Dubai Expo 2020 was one of the main contributing factors to this sharp rebound. The event itself was a collection of international (192 countries) pavilions that showcased countries' cultures, technology and architecture. The expo attracted over 24 million visitors, and the attraction of new businesses and residents is expected to earn Dubai over \$42 billion over the course of the next 20 years. However, over 40,000 migrant workers were employed in the construction of the Expo. These workers were exposed to forced labor practices, and reportedly suffered from racial discrimination throughout the process. According to interviews done by Equidem, a human rights group, about 83% of workers had paid illegal recruitment fees, 37% reported three or more issues indicative of forced labor, and 20% reported five or more issues. Only one of the interviewees still had access to their own passport. The UAE has made some efforts to address forced labor. However, action is focused mostly on victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking, where the government has provided hotlines and awareness campaigns. There is very limited support for victims of forced labor, and little structure exists to punish employers.

These incidents are not limited to Qatar and the UAE, but occur across the Middle Eastern region to varying degrees of severity.

IV. UN Action

UN Women, which is a UN organization centred around promoting gender equality and rights for women, have worked with an external association, 'Kafa,' to provide services to female migrant workers in Lebanon who have been victims of sexual and/or physical assault by their

sponsor employers. Services provided include provision of shelter, provision of health and psychological services, and legal services.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination had a meeting in 2024 with a delegation from Qatar. Here, the delegation of Qatar was questioned on the mandatory use of HIV tests for migrant workers seeking employment, and continued HIV testing follow employment, as committee experts did not believe it adhered to principles of informed consent. The delegation's response was that HIV tests were mandatory for all residents of Qatar, regardless of nationality. The delegation and committee also discussed progress on the abolition of the kafala system in Qatar, summarizing that amendments to the original abolition had occurred in 2015 and 2020 which gave workers the freedom to change employer without requiring a certificate and gave them the right to leave the country at will without needing an exit permit. The committee also discussed Qatar's reforms of worker's rights, residence of migrant workers, and the worker's insurance fund. Overall, the meeting helped to inform the UN on Qatar's continued action against the abuse of migrant workers, and also helped to guide the delegation of Qatar to continue legislative reform and which path to follow.

The International Labor Organization has published a multitude of reports detailing the severity of the human rights violations under the kafala system. The ILO has also created a list of key recommendations for countries operating with the kafala system. These are:

1. A migrant worker's entry, residence and work permit should not be tied to a specific employer.
2. A migrant worker should be responsible for renewing their own visa and work/residence permit.
3. A migrant worker should have the right to terminate their contract within notice, and to change employer freely.
4. A migrant worker should be able to exit the country at will.
5. Power over residency status should be held by the government and not employers.

The ILO has worked with many Gulf states to introduce minimum wage laws and enhance worker protection laws.

Though progress in abolishing the kafala system has been promising in many Middle Eastern countries, efforts made by governments has been limited. This is most likely due to many Middle Eastern countries' reliance on migrant workers in order to sustain their labor force and their economy. In particular, the tourism industry heavily relies on migrant workers for the construction of mega-projects such as the Dubai Expo and the Khalifa stadium. Without guarantees that the tourism industry will be supported without forced labor, Middle Eastern governments will mostly be reluctant to enact meaningful reforms.

V. Essential questions

1. How can Middle Eastern countries decrease their reliance on forced labor for touristic construction projects?
2. To what extent is it reasonable for Middle Eastern countries to abolish the kafala system before alternative sources of labor are available to support each country's growing tourism and construction industries?
3. How can countries where migrant workers originate from use their own policies to protect their own workers from abuse and exploitation?
4. Should Middle Eastern countries shift their labor force from predominantly migratory to predominantly domestic?
5. How can legal frameworks be put into place to prevent the continued use of the kafala system and prevent the general abuse of migrant workers in touristic operations?
6. To what extent should Middle Eastern countries be held accountable for their role in protecting the kafala system, neglecting to punish employers, and enabling the abuse of migrant workers?
7. How can Middle Eastern countries be effectively supervised to guarantee that resolutions are followed in an effective and orderly manner?
8. How can Middle Eastern countries cooperate with domestic and foreign private companies to supervise employer activities and incentivize the fair treatment of migrant workers?

9. How can global nations help support the tourism industry of Middle Eastern countries in order to reduce the pressure on Middle Eastern governments to grow the industry using forced labor?

VI. Countries

1. Russia
2. The United States of America
3. The United Kingdom
4. China
5. France
6. Saudi Arabia
7. Egypt
8. The United Arab Emirates
9. Qatar
10. India
11. Bangladesh
12. Philippines
13. Pakistan
14. Oman
15. Portugal
16. Uganda
17. Kenya
18. Yemen
19. Switzerland
20. Nepal

21. Maldives
22. Brazil
23. Colombia
24. Mexico
25. Australia

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