

Research Briefing

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By Philip Loft,

Antonia Garraway,

(contributor)

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Qatar: Country profile

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Summary

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The UK has strong diplomatic, military, and economic ties with Qatar, and is currently negotiating a trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose six members include Qatar. In 2022, Qatar is also due to host the Men's Football World Cup. This has placed its human rights record under scrutiny.

This briefing provides an introduction to Qatari politics, human rights, trade, and international relations. It also signposts further reading. Please visit the Library's [Middle East pages](#) for detailed analysis on the region's politics.

1

Economy

Headline statistics

- **2020 Population:** 2.9 million (UK: 67.2 million).
- **2020 Gross Domestic Product (GDP):** US\$144 billion (UK: US\$2.8 trillion).
- **2020 GDP per capita** (GDP divided by population): US\$50,100 (UK: US\$41,000).
- **2021 GDP Growth:** 1.5% (UK: 7.4%). **2022 GDP growth:** 3.4% (UK: 3.7%).¹

Qatar is a high-income economy, heavily reliant on migrant labour. It has recently abolished a sponsorship system of labour, whereby migrants had to seek permission from employers to change jobs and leave the country.

Oil products are important to its economy, with extractive industries constituting around 37% of GDP—down from 53% in 2014. The service sector, such as financial services and telecoms, constitutes 40% of GDP, and manufacturing 7% (data for 2020).

Oil and gas are the source of 80% of government revenue, given the absence of personal income taxes. This means falls in oil prices have a significant impact on the Government's reform programmes.

Qatar also has the third largest proven gas reserves in the world, behind only Russia and Iran.²

A major shock to Qatar's economy occurred when some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), imposed an embargo from 2017 to 2021. See page 9, below, for information on the dispute.

As part of the GCC, Qatar applies low external tariffs with its neighbours and is working towards a common market. This remains in progress, and will provide for freedom of movement, residence and access to health and social services for GCC citizens. The GCC has entered negotiations for free trade agreements with the EU, India, Japan, and the UK (see page 7, below).³

¹ World Bank, [Qatar](#) and International Monetary Fund, [World economic outlook](#), April 2022, pp6, 40
All sources accessed 5 April 2022 unless stated.

² Europa World Plus, [Qatar profile](#). Accessible via a Commons Library log-in

³ World Trade Organization, [Trade policy review: Qatar, full report](#), April 2021, pp9, 12, 27-8

Qatar's National Vision 2030

Launched in 2008, the Vision [sets out how Qatar plans to advance its economic and social development](#). This includes increasing opportunities for Qatari women in education, politics, and work, protecting the rights of migrant workers, and strengthening the rule of law. The Government aims to continue to develop the country's oil and gas sectors but also start to diversify the economy.⁴

Qatar in the Middle East



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⁴ Government of Qatar, [Qatar national vision 2030](#)

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Leadership and politics

Emir

Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani has been Qatari Emir (ruler) since 2013, succeeding his father. He was born in 1980. The Emir exercises full executive power and appoints the Prime Minister and Cabinet.⁵ Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al Thani was appointed as Prime Minister in January 2020.

Shura Council

Qatar now has a partially elected legislative assembly, the Shura Council. In October 2021, Qatar held its first ever elections to the Council. 30 of its 45 members are elected, and the remainder are appointed by the Emir. No political parties are permitted. Only two women sit in the Council, both appointed by the Emir.⁶

The Council has a degree of legislative authority, including approval of the country's budget. Defence, security, and economic and investment policy are not subject to Council scrutiny. The Emir has a veto on all issues.⁷

Electorate

Of Qatar's 2.9 million population, only 300,000 were eligible to vote. Only those classed as "native" Qataris (meaning their families settled in Qatar before 1930 or those that can otherwise prove direct descent) were eligible.⁸

There are more than 1.9 million migrant workers in Qatar, who lack many of the same rights as citizens. This includes the right to vote.⁹

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Political rights

The US State Department's 2020 report on human rights in Qatar cited ongoing restrictions on political participation:

- **Free expression:** In January 2020, legislation imposed up to five years in prison for spreading rumours or false news with ill-intent. Previous

⁵ Al-Jazeera, [Who is Qatar's emir](#), 5 June 2017.

⁶ Reuters, [Qatar emir appoints two women to advisory council](#), 14 October 2021.

⁷ DW, [Qatari elections: A PR stunt or a step toward democracy?](#), 24 August 2021

⁸ HRW, [Qatar: Election law exposes discriminatory citizenship](#), 9 September 2021

⁹ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Visit to Qatar](#), 27 April 2020

legislation, passed in 2014, already criminalised spreading “false news” on the internet.¹⁰

- **Free media:** All print media is owned by the ruling family or those with close ties to them. Material is open to censoring. Most TV and radio news reflect Government views. There are allegations of Government influence over the state-owned international news agency, Al-Jazeera (allegations often relate to its coverage of foreign governments).
- **Freedom of assembly/association:** Political parties and trade unions are banned. Civil society organisations must first register with the Government, though informal community organisations can operate without registering if they do not undertake political activities. As of 2020, there are 21 registered associations.¹¹

In 2021, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, based in Lebanon, criticised the restricted nature of recent elections and reported detention of protesters.¹²

4 Human rights

Qatar is due to host the Men’s Football World Cup in November/December 2022. This has placed its human rights record under scrutiny. Several organisations are monitoring human rights, including the National Human Rights Committee, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Trade Union Confederation. They report:

- **Death sentences continue to be imposed.** The last person put to death was in 2020, according to Amnesty International. Prior to 2020, the last known execution in the country was carried out in 2000.¹³
- **Women’s rights:** Education is relatively open to girls, but discrimination in judicial proceedings, freedom of movement, marriage and inheritance are reported. Children of Qatari women married to non-Qataris, for example, are unable to assume Qatari nationality. Human Rights Watch say the male guardianship system, requiring women to ask male permission in many fields such as travel and work, continues to have a negative impact on women. In response, Qatar’s Government said women do not need male permission to work in the public sector.¹⁴
- **Workers’ rights:** There have been consistent complaints that migrant workers are exploited and lack protections. In 2021, Amnesty International and the Guardian newspaper released a report accusing

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Qatar: 5-year prison sentence set for “fake news.”](#) 22 January 2022

¹¹ State Department, [2020 country reports on human rights practices: Qatar](#), March 2021, parts A & B

¹² Gulf Centre for Human Rights, [News from Qatar](#)

¹³ Amnesty International, [Death sentences and executions 2020](#), March 2021, pp4, 43

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, [Qatar: Male guardianship severely curtails women’s rights](#), 29 March 2021

Qatar of failing to explain up to 70% of migrant worker deaths (6,700 people) over the last ten years, while acknowledging the “significant” reforms the country has made.¹⁵ In a separate investigation, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated the number of deaths in 2020 to be at least 50, but for the number to be underreported. In response, Qatar has pledged to continue to work with the ILO.¹⁶

Reforms include the adoption of a non-discriminatory monthly minimum wage, applying to all workers, and abolition of the Kafala (“sponsorship”) system. This means workers are no longer required to obtain a permit from their employer to go abroad or to change jobs.¹⁷ However, employers’ consent to renew residency permits was retained.¹⁸

- The country **criminalises same-sex relationships**. LGBT+ persons [continue to face a “hostile context”](#) in the country.¹⁹

What’s the UK Government assessment?

Since being awarded the World Cup, the UK Government says Qatar has taken “concrete steps” to improve the situation for workers, and expects it to continue to engage with the International Labour Organization on reform.²⁰

The Government argues its close relationship with Qatar allows it to regularly raise rights issues, including with Qatar’s Human Rights Committee.²¹

5 UK-Qatar relations

Qatar gained independence from the UK in 1971.

Gulf Strategy Fund (GSF)

The UK’s GSF works in several Gulf countries, including Qatar. Through it, the UK supports Qatar’s preparations for the World Cup. UK regional

¹⁵ Amnesty International, [Qatar’s failure to investigate, remedy and prevent migrant workers’ deaths](#), 26 November 2021, p38

¹⁶ Al-Jazeera, [Qatar welcomes ILO report despite admitted data gaps](#), 20 November 2021

¹⁷ International Labour Organization, [Qatar’s new minimum wage enters into force](#), 19 March 2021

¹⁸ Amnesty International, [Qatar’s failure to investigate, remedy and prevent migrant workers’ deaths](#), 26 November 2021, p15

¹⁹ International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, [State-sponsored homophobia, 2020](#), December 2020, p68

²⁰ HC Deb, [10 December 2020](#), c493WH; HL Deb, [30 November 2021](#), c1273

²¹ PQ 169363 [[Qatar: LGBT people](#)], 11 September 2018

programmes also support tax reform and environmental management with the aim of increasing investment opportunities for UK companies.²²

In 2021, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and Human Rights in the Gulf argued the fund should be suspended as it failed to contribute to progress on human rights. The Government disagreed, arguing all funding is subject to checks to ensure it does not impact negatively on human rights and said it will continue to raise human rights concerns with Gulf countries.²³

Plans for a trade agreement

Trade between the UK and Qatar takes place on [World Trade Organisation \(WTO\) terms](#), meaning the countries must treat each other's goods and services the same as those from other WTO members.²⁴ A preferential agreement would allow for more favourable terms.

Following a consultation, in June 2022 the Government [launched free trade negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\)](#). The issue of human rights is likely to be an area of scrutiny. Total trade in goods and services between the GCC and the UK reached £41.4 billion in 2019. This would make the bloc, as a whole, the UK's tenth largest trading partner. However, trade fell to £30.4 billion in 2020.²⁵

Headline economic statistics on UK-Qatar relations

1. **Trade with the UK:** Qatar is the UK's 41st largest trading partner (2021).
2. **Total UK-Qatari trade (exports and imports):** £4.8 billion in 2021, down £786 million in 2020.
3. **Top five UK goods exports to Qatar:** Power generators, cars, aircraft, scientific instruments, and miscellaneous electrical goods (2021).
4. **Top five UK goods imports from Qatar:** Gas, power generators, scientific instruments, miscellaneous metal manufactures, refined oil (2021).²⁶

Notes: Data on the top five services traded is not available. During this period, trade was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and related health measures.

²² British Embassy Doha, [invites submissions for the GSF 2022 to 2025](#), 21 March 2022 and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [GSF programme summary](#) [for 2020-21], 24 June 2021

²³ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, sect 2

²⁴ Department for International Development (DIT), [Trading under WTO terms](#), updated 31 December 2020

²⁵ DIT, [Information note on consultation relating to future trade negotiations between the UK and GCC](#), October 2021, p9 and [UK approach to negotiating a free trade agreement with the GCC](#), 22 June 2022

²⁶ DIT, [Trade and investment factsheet: Qatar](#) (updated monthly), accessed 30 May 2022

Other UK-Qatari engagement

- **UK military forces** are based in the Gulf to protect shipping and to conduct operations against groups such as Islamic State/Daesh. The RAF's Middle East Operational Headquarters is based in Qatar. Cooperation has included a joint Typhoon squadron.²⁷
- **The British Embassy in Kabul has relocated** to Qatar following the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan in 2021. Many evacuees from Afghanistan in August 2021 were moved out via Qatar.²⁸
- **UK universities** with campuses in Qatar include [Aberdeen](#), [Liverpool John Moores](#) and [Northumbria](#).²⁹
- The first **UK-Qatar strategic dialogue** took place in May 2022. The countries pledged greater engagement on energy and education issues. The UK said it would provide support for World Cup security.³⁰
- **Business engagement** includes Rolls-Royce signing a partnership with the Qatar Foundation to generate 10,000 climate-tech jobs by 2040. Campuses will be constructed in Qatar and the North of England.³¹

6 Foreign relations

The Sunni-Shia Muslim divide is a significant one in the Middle East, with Shia and Sunni states often seeking to support sectarian groups beyond their borders. Most Governments are Sunni Muslims, as are their populations. This is the case of Qatar. Iran is the major Shia-majority state.³²

The US

Like the UK, the US has significant links with Qatar. Qatar has facilitated US-Taliban talks, hosts around 8,000 US troops, and is a significant importer of US arms.³³

²⁷ Commons Library, [UK forces in the Middle East region](#), CBP8794

²⁸ Gov.UK, [British Embassy Kabul](#)

²⁹ University of Aberdeen, [AFG college](#); Liverpool John Moores, [Oryx Universal College](#) and Northumbria, [Qatar](#)

³⁰ Number Ten, [Joint communiqué: UK-The State of Qatar](#), 24 May 2022, accessed 30 May 2022

³¹ Rolls-Royce, [Qatar Foundation and Rolls-Royce sign strategic partnership](#), 1 November 2021

³² BBC News, [Sunnis and Shias: Islam's ancient schism](#), 4 January 2016

³³ Congressional Research Service, [Qatar: Governance, security and US policy](#), R44533

In 2022, the Biden Administration announced the country would become a “major non-NATO ally.” This status is also held by Japan and Australia and allows preferential access to US equipment and technology.³⁴

Russia

Qatar is likely to provide a significant alternative source to Russian oil and gas as the EU, US and UK seek to reduce their dependence following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Qatar was co-sponsor of a UN General Assembly Resolution in February calling for Russia to withdraw.³⁵

Other Gulf states

Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), whose members include Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The GCC aims to build political and economies ties between its members.³⁶

In June 2017, GCC states and others cut diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed limits on trade and movement. The countries alleged the country supported terrorism, including through being too close to Iran and supporting political Islam organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

In contrast to other Gulf states, for example, Qatar had supported the Egyptian Presidency of Mohammad Morsi, a member of the Brotherhood, while Gulf states backed his overthrow in 2013. The Brotherhood has ties with groups across the Middle East, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE have worked to suppress it, seeing it is a threat to their regimes.

An agreement ending the dispute was signed in January 2021. It detailed no actions for Qatar to take.³⁷

Iran

Regional tensions with Iran are high, due to its nuclear programme and support for groups hostile to Gulf states such as the Houthis in Yemen and Shia Muslim militias in Iraq.³⁸ Qatar has the potential to be a mediator between Iran and the Gulf states, given its diplomatic links with both.

³⁴ Atlantic Council, [As Qatar becomes a non-NATO ally, greater responsibility conveys with the status](#), 3 March 2022

³⁵ Atlantic Council, [The UN Resolution on Ukraine: How did the Middle East vote?](#), 2 March 2022

³⁶ Al-Jazeera, [What is the GCC?](#), 4 December 2017

³⁷ Commons Library, [The Gulf in 2021](#), CBP9284, sect 5.1

³⁸ Commons Library, [Iran’s influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504

During the Gulf boycott of Qatar, Iran-Qatar relations strengthened. Iran provided food assistance and trade between the two increased. In 2018, Qatar opposed the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement.

In 2022, Qatar hosted the Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, in his first official visit to the Gulf.³⁹

The Taliban

Qatar hosted the talks between the US and the Taliban which resulted in the 2020 peace agreement and eventual withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2021. Qatar is likely to act as a facilitator going forward.⁴⁰

7

Further resources

General background/profiles

- Europa World Plus, [Qatar profile](#). Provides economic and political data and describes key events in the country. Accessible via a Commons Library log-in.
- CIA, [Middle East: Qatar](#). Headline statistical information on population, economy, and energy.
- BBC News, [Qatar profile—Timeline](#), December 2018. Key events to 2018.
- Congressional Research Service, [Qatar: Governance, security and US policy](#), R44533. 25-page briefing on politics, foreign policy, and economic issues from the perspective of US-Qatari relations
- House of Lords Library, [UK relations with Qatar](#), January 2022. Summary overview of the economy, World Cup preparations and UK relations

Recent UK Parliament proceedings

- HL Deb, [Government of Qatar](#), 20 January 2022
- HL Deb, [Qatar: Football World Cup 2022](#), 30 November 2021
- HC Deb, [UK relations with Qatar](#), 10 December 2020

³⁹ Arab Gulf States in Washington, [Qatar and Iran expand ties amid broader Gulf de-escalation](#), 11 March 2022

⁴⁰ BBC News, [Afghan conflict: US and Taliban sign deal to end 18-year war](#), 29 February 2020

Human rights: General issues

- Amnesty International, [Everything you need to know: Human rights Qatar 2021/22](#). Links to news and reports on the country.
- Human Rights Watch, [Qatar: Events of 2021](#). Overview of human rights for women, workers, and LGBT+ people.
- US State Department, [2021 country reports on human rights practices: Qatar](#), April 2022. Wide ranging report on political and other rights.
- UN Human Rights Council, [Universal periodic reviews: Qatar](#). The Council conducts regular reviews of human rights in every country. The most recent review for Qatar was 2019.
- Gulf Centre for Human Rights, [Homepage](#). Based in Lebanon but documents human rights issues in Qatar.

Human rights: Specific issues

- Reporters without Borders, [Qatar](#). Work on Qatari media freedom
- Borgen Project, [Women's rights in Qatar show promising growth](#), March 2021. Short summary focusing on education and continuing discrimination for women and girls.
- Human Rights Watch, [Qatar: Male guardianship severely curtails women's rights](#), March 2021. Summary of 100-page report on how guardianship affects marriage, study, work, and travel.
- International Labour Organization (ILO), [The ILO in Qatar](#). Links to reports and assessments on worker's rights.
- ILO, [One is too many: The collection and analysis of data on occupation injuries in Qatar](#), November 2021. Provides an estimate of the number of worker deaths and injuries in 2020.
- US State Department, [2020 report on international religious freedom: Qatar](#), May 2021. Describes legal and social practices on religion.

Trade and economic profiles

- Department for International Trade, [Trade and Investment Factsheet: Qatar](#), updated monthly. Provides a 15-page overview of the UK's trade with Qatar.
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Economic Factsheet: Qatar](#). Two-page summary with key economic indicators

- International Monetary Fund, [Qatar](#). Reports on Qatar's economy and future challenges and opportunities.
- Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, [Submission to the International Trade Committee on UK trade negotiations: Agreement with Gulf Cooperation Council](#), January 2022. Describes human rights issues raised by the potential trade agreement with the UK.

Qatar's foreign relations

- Council on Foreign Relations, [Qatar](#). Publishes analysis of Qatari foreign policy, including the crisis in its relations with Gulf states from 2017.
- Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Foreign policy](#). Describes Qatari foreign policy principles and statements on issues such as climate change
- Arab Gulf States Institute, [Qatari regional relations and foreign policy after Al Ula](#), April 2021. Looks forward to Qatar's relations with the Gulf post-reconciliation. Al Ula is the place where the 2021 reconciliation agreement ending the dispute was reached.
- Council on Foreign Relations, [Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood](#). Provides background to the movement and differing attitudes to it across the region.
- Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9504. Describes Iran's influence abroad, why it is controversial, and outlook for regional relations.
- Commons Library, [Alternatives to Russian oil: Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and Venezuela](#), CBP9518. Describes significant oil producers in the Middle East, and Qatar's potential role as source to replace Russian oil and gas.

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