



Faith, Ethics and Sustainable Peace in a Fragmented Global Order: Inter-Faith Dialogue and Human Rights in the Post-Kafala Gulf¹

ABSTRACT

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In a world increasingly marked by war, displacement, and moral polarisation, the erosion of the global order and waning confidence in multilateral diplomacy have rendered the search for ethical frameworks capable of sustaining peace and human dignity for all more urgent than ever. This paper explores how inter-faith dialogue and faith-inspired ethics can contribute to sustainable peace and human rights in times of international crisis. Drawing notably on the OHCHR Faith for Rights framework, and the Bangkok Declaration on Faith, Dharma and Human Rights, it situates faith traditions as potential mediating forces between global human rights norms and local moral economies.

Through a focus on GCC region – particularly Qatar and United Arab Emirates, where recent labour reforms, including the partial and full dismantling of the kafala system, have redefined the ethics of migration and work – it critically examines how faith and moral reasoning intersect with the pursuit of dignity and social justice. It considers both the theoretical premises of these reforms and their practical implementation, assessing the extent to which ethical and spiritual narratives can inform rights realisation within politically and culturally sensitive contexts.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, treating inter-faith dialogue as an epistemic space where ethics, governance, and lived experience converge. By examining the intersection of faith, human rights, and peacebuilding in a region emblematic of both global inequality and moral reform, the paper positions the Gulf as a microcosm of wider international crises – where competing narratives of modernity, faith, and justice collide.

Ultimately, it argues that faith-based ethics can contribute to advancement of human rights and conditions conducive to peace, but that their credibility and effectiveness remain contingent upon their translation into protections, dignity, and lived realities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the intensification of debates around the role of ethics, dialogue, and human dignity within global governance prompted by geopolitical fragmentation, conflict resurgence, and decline in multilateral trust. Meanwhile, questions pertaining to migration, labour exploitation, and social inequality have increasingly challenged traditional understandings of peace and security, shifting attention towards broader conceptions of sustainable peace grounded in justice, inclusion, and institutional legitimacy. Within this evolving context, ethical and faith-informed frameworks have been reemerging amid international discourse as potential processes allowing human rights principles, coexistence and social peace to be articulated across diverse political and cultural settings.

These debates hold distinct relevance within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, where labour systems have historically heavily relied upon temporary migration governance in conjunction with the kafala sponsorship system. Over the past decade, states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have introduced significant labour reforms aimed at improving different aspects of working conditions for migrant workers. Simultaneously, broader narratives surrounding tolerance, coexistence, interfaith dialogue, and responsible governance have become more visible within regional and international policy spaces. This convergence raises welcome questions on the relationship between ethical narratives, governance legitimacy, and the practical realisation of human rights in sensitive contexts.

This paper thus offers an examination of the extent to which ethical frameworks and interfaith dialogue may contribute to the advancement of human rights and more largely, to conditions conducive to sustainable peace in the GCC post-kafala reforms context. Focusing primarily on Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as exemplary case studies, it analyses how labour reforms were framed and implemented while assessing the interaction between rights-based discourse, faith-informed ethical narratives, and lived realities. Far from approaching ethics and interfaith dialogue as inherently transformative, the paper rather critically examines some of their key potential contributions and limitations.



Methodologically, the paper is inspired by a qualitative and interpretative socio-legal approach involving elements of policy analysis, comparative case study methodology, and engagement with existing material relating to the issues at play. In doing so, it situates GCC labour reform processes within broader contemporary discussions on peace, pluralism, dignity, and the future of governance in an increasingly fragmented global order.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Ethical Frameworks and Human Rights

The concept of ethics occupies a central place across disciplines concerned with law, governance, politics, and social relations. Broadly understood, ethics refers to principles and systems of moral reasoning that distinguish between what ought and ought not to be done. Ethical frameworks therefore shape understandings of justice, responsibility, dignity, and appropriate conduct, while simultaneously informing legal systems, institutional practices, and policy choices. In the context of human rights discourse, ethics provides an important normative foundation through which rights, obligations, and social responsibilities are interpreted and justified.

A number of ethical traditions have influenced contemporary understandings of rights and justice. Deontological approaches, notably associated with Immanuel Kant, emphasise duties and moral obligations grounded in human rationality, arguing that individuals should be treated as ends in themselves rather than merely as means (Dang, 2022; Forcehimes, 2017). By contrast, consequentialist and utilitarian traditions assess morality through the outcomes of actions, evaluating whether they contribute to collective welfare, happiness, or the reduction of harm (Kupperman, 1981; Sen, 1979). Although these traditions differ in orientation, both have informed broader debates surrounding fairness, responsibility, and the ethical organisation of social and economic systems.



Alongside secular ethical traditions, religious and faith-based ethics have historically played a major role in shaping moral and legal norms across societies. Divine command approaches, for example, locate moral obligations within religious principles and conceptions of divine justice, while broader faith traditions have contributed significantly to contemporary understandings of dignity, compassion, equality, and social responsibility (Graber, 1975; Vallier, 2024). Such ethical traditions continue to influence public discourse and governance frameworks in many parts of the world, including the Gulf region.

Human rights scholarship has similarly approached rights not solely as legal entitlements, but also as ethical claims grounded in shared humanity. Kirchschräger (2014), for instance, distinguishes between the moral and legal dimensions of human rights, arguing that rights derive both from universal ethical obligations owed to individuals by virtue of their humanity and from their codification within legal and institutional frameworks. This distinction is particularly relevant in contexts where legal reform and rights implementation remain uneven, or where ethical legitimacy plays an important role in shaping public acceptance of rights-based norms.

At the same time, the relationship between universal human rights norms and local cultural or religious contexts remains the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Universalist approaches, commonly associated with Donnelly (2007), maintain that human rights belong equally and universally to all individuals regardless of cultural context. By contrast, cultural relativist perspectives caution against the imposition of externally derived norms that may insufficiently account for local traditions, social structures, or moral systems (Zechenter, 1997). While cultural relativism has at times been used to justify restrictions on rights, scholars have increasingly advocated for more context-sensitive approaches capable of reconciling universal human rights standards with diverse political, religious, and cultural realities (Donnelly, 2007).

Within this broader debate, ethical frameworks should not be understood solely as abstract philosophical systems. Rather, they also shape governance practices, reform processes, and institutional legitimacy. In labour governance contexts, ethical narratives may influence both the justification and reception of reforms, particularly where states



seek to reconcile international human rights expectations with local cultural, political, or religious frameworks. This dynamic is especially relevant within the GCC region, where labour reforms have increasingly been framed through a combination of rights-based, developmental, and ethical narratives.

2.2. Faith-Based Ethics and Interfaith Dialogue

Faith and religion have historically played a significant role in shaping ethical systems, social norms, and understandings of justice across societies. Religious traditions have influenced legal and political thought throughout history, contributing to broader conceptions of dignity, solidarity, responsibility, and social coexistence. Consequently, religion remains closely intertwined with contemporary discussions surrounding ethics and human rights.

Scholars have argued that many of the principles underpinning international human rights frameworks resonate with values found across multiple religious traditions (Twiss, 2005). Human rights norms are therefore not solely grounded in secular legal systems, but also intersect with broader moral and ethical traditions that continue to inform social and political life. In this sense, faith-based ethics may provide important normative resources capable of reinforcing commitments to justice, protection from harm, and respect for human dignity.

At the same time, the relationship between religion and human rights remains complex. While religious traditions may support rights-based values, they may also generate tensions where certain interpretations conflict with contemporary understandings of equality, freedom, or non-discrimination (Miller, 2023). For this reason, scholars increasingly emphasise the importance of pluralistic and dialogical approaches capable of facilitating engagement between different religious, cultural, and normative systems.

Within this context, interfaith dialogue has emerged as an increasingly relevant mechanism through which ethical and human rights discourses may interact. Rather than functioning as a normative framework in itself, interfaith dialogue may be understood as a process facilitating communication, negotiation, and mutual understanding across



religious and cultural boundaries. Such dialogue can contribute to bridging global human rights norms with local ethical systems, particularly in politically and culturally sensitive environments (Driessen, 2025).

The growing relevance of interfaith engagement is also reflected in a number of multilateral initiatives and soft-law frameworks. Instruments such as the OHCHR “Faith for Rights” framework and the Bangkok Declaration on Faith and Human Rights embody attempts to connect universal human rights principles with faith-informed ethical language and dialogue-based approaches to coexistence and inclusion. More broadly, they seek to encourage collaboration between faith actors and human rights institutions, while emphasising the compatibility between religious ethics and universal principles of dignity and equality, and inclusion. In doing so, they reflect wider efforts to move beyond simplistic binaries opposing religion and human rights, instead positioning faith-based engagement as a potential contributor to social cohesion and sustainable peace (OHCHR, 2019; OHCHR, 2025).

In the GCC context, where religion continues to occupy an important role within social and political life, faith-informed ethical narratives may therefore influence how labour reforms, human rights principles, and governance practices are articulated and legitimised. Interfaith and ethical dialogue spaces may consequently provide important avenues through which international norms are adapted, negotiated, or embedded within local frameworks.

In this sense, interfaith and ethical dialogue may function not only as normative engagement mechanisms, but also as instruments through which states and institutions seek to enhance the legitimacy and social acceptability of reform processes.

2.3. Sustainable Peace, Human Rights and Social Justice

2.3.1. Positive and Negative Peace: Towards a Concept of Just Peace

The concept of sustainable peace has evolved beyond the traditional understanding of peace as the mere absence of conflict. Foundational distinctions introduced by Johan Galtung differentiate between negative peace, defined as the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, which encompasses the presence of justice, social equity, and stable



institutional relations (Galtung, 1969/2018). While negative peace may ensure short-term stability, it remains insufficient for addressing structural inequalities and underlying grievances that also risk perpetuating cycles of instability.

Building on this distinction, scholarship on peacebuilding has increasingly conceptualised “just peace” as a more demanding yet sustainable form of peace. As developed in the work of Alexis Keller and others, just peace is to be understood not as a static outcome but rather as a process requiring mutual recognition, negotiated concessions, and the establishment of shared norms governing coexistence (Allan and Keller, 2006). This reflects a broader shift away from purely legalistic or punitive models of justice towards more relational and socially embedded approaches.

Importantly, both theoretical and empirical accounts suggest that peace is unlikely to be durable where it is perceived as fundamentally unjust by the parties involved. Agreements that fail to incorporate fairness and recognition often generate resentment and instability, whereas those grounded in (perceived) equitable arrangements are more likely to endure (Fixdal, 2012; Richmond, 2020). In this sense, sustainable peace is intrinsically linked to the quality and the perception of justice, rather than reduced to a cessation of conflict.

2.3.2. Linking Peace to dignity, Justice and Labour conditions

Extending these insights beyond traditional post-conflict settings, the principles underpinning just peace can be applied and adapted to broader socio-economic and governance contexts. Central to this extension is the concept of human dignity, which functions both as a normative foundation and as a practical condition for sustainable peace (Allan and Keller, 2006).

In human rights and socio-legal scholarship, dignity is closely tied to the recognition of individuals as rights-bearing agents, entitled to fair treatment, respect and meaningful participation in social and economic life (Ssenyonjo, 2019; Mantouvalou, 2020). Where dignity is undermined – be it through exploitation, exclusion, or structural inequality – the conditions for a “just” social order would be weakened, regardless of the absence of conflict.



From this perspective, labour conditions emerge as a critical site through which dignity and justice can be either realised or denied. Employment relations that ensure fair wages, mobility, protection from abuse, and access to remedies contribute not only to individual well-being of rights-holders but also to broader social stability and cohesion (Mantouvalou, 2020; Ssenyonjo, 2019). Conversely, where systems restrict rights or institutionalise dependency – such as those historically associated with the kafala system – they risk perpetuating structural inequalities that are incompatible with the principles pertaining to a positive or just peace.

This shift in analytical scale, moving from inter-state or post-conflict peace processes to state-individual and state-market relations, highlights a broader applicability of the just peace theory. This is because the same underlying logic holds: where relationships are perceived as unjust or a party is lacking in recognition, the potential for social fragmentation considerably increases. By contrast, embedding dignity and fairness within labour governance frameworks can contribute to more stable and cohesive societies (Richmond, 2020).

In this sense, sustainable peace may be understood not only as the outcome of formal diplomatic or post-conflict processes, but also as a function of everyday governance practices, including labour regulation. Such reframing allows for a more integrated understanding of how human rights, social justice, and ethical frameworks intersect in shaping macro-level stability and micro-level lived realities.

3. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

3.1. Research Approach: A Qualitative Socio-Legal Perspective

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive socio-legal approach to examine how ethical frameworks interact with labour reforms and human rights outcomes in the GCC. Socio-legal scholarship emphasises the distinction between “law in the book” and “law in action”, suggesting the importance of analysing how legal norms are interpreted, implemented, and experienced in practice (Banak and Travers, 2017; Cotterell, 2021).



In this context, a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate, as the paper seeks to explore not only formal legal developments, but also the normative and discursive dimensions through which concepts such as dignity, justice, and rights are articulated and applied. Rather than testing causal hypotheses, the present analysis proposes an interpretive account of how ethical narratives – in particular, those informed by faith traditions – interact with legal and policy frameworks.

This approach aligns with broader constructivist perspectives in international relations, purporting that norms and values are socially embedded, negotiated, and contested, especially so in contexts characterised by a plurality of legal and moral systems (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2018; Wiener, 2018).

3.2. Methods and Research Design: Policy Analysis and Comparative Case Studies

The research design combines salient elements of policy analysis with a comparative case study approach, focusing on Qatar as primary case and the United Arab Emirates as a comparator. These cases were selected due to their prominence in recent labour reforms, the availability of relatively robust and recent data, as well as their engagement with both international human rights mechanisms and faith-based dialogue initiatives.

Case study methodology enables an in-depth examination of complex governance processes within their specific political and social contexts (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2016). The comparative dimension allows for patterns and contextual variations to emerge, making way for a grounded assessment of how reforms are framed, implemented, and experienced within the same region.

The analysis draws on national labour legislation, policy documents, reports from international organisations, and outputs from interfaith initiatives. These materials were triaged based on recency, institutional credibility and relevance to reform processes, before being analysed for their substantive merit and normative framing. Particular attention is given to how ethical language is mobilised within such reform processes (Bowen, 2009; Cairney, 2021).



3.3. Analytical Focus: Law in Practice, Narratives, and Lived Realities

The analytical framework of this paper centres on three main interrelated dimensions: legal reforms, policy narratives, and lived realities.

First, the paper examines the scope and substance of labour reforms, particularly those aimed at dismantling or distancing from the kafala system. Second, it analyses some of the core narratives and discourses accompanying these reforms, including the use of human rights language, ethical grounding, and reference to religious, faith-based, or cultural values.

Third, and critically, the study engages with existing evidence on implementation or lived experience, drawing on reports, internal primary data to assess the extent to which reforms translate into meaningful and tangible improvements in labour conditions. The analysis is additionally informed by anonymised and confidential discussions conducted over the past year with migrant workers having firsthand experience of labour conditions in the GCC region. While these exchanges do not constitute a formal interview dataset, they provide supplementary contextual insight into lived realities surrounding labour reforms. This reflects a central concern of socio-legal scholarship, namely: studying the gap between formal commitment and their real-world application, especially in the field of economic and social rights, where effective implementation remains a persistent challenge (Merry, 2016; Ssenyonjo, 2019).

Within this constellation, interfaith dialogue is treated as a process rather than a normative endpoint. It is thus analysed as a space in which global norms and local ethical systems come into contact, potentially facilitating the integration, adaptation, or contestation of human rights principles (Levitt and Merry, 2009; Driessen, 2025).

3.4. Limitations and Scope

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the paper relies primarily on document analysis and secondary sources, thereby constraining direct engagement with the lived experiences of affected individuals – particularly migrant workers. While a



number of existing reports provide valuable insights, the limited use of primary data may reduce the ability to fully capture informal practices or less visible dynamics.

Second, the political sensitivity surrounding the GCC context affects both the availability (quantity) and the framing (quality) of official data, warranting a cautious and critical reading and use of sources, while reducing the extent to which causal inferences can be established (George and Benett, 2005).

Finally, the comparative scope has been designed around, and limited to, two case studies. The objective is not to produce generalisable findings applicable across the region, but rather to offer a context-sensitive examination of how ethics, law and policy contemporaneously intersect in specific reform settings. This is consistent with case study approaches, particularly suited to in-depth and context-dependent analysis, even where broader generalisation remains highly limited (Yin, 2018; Gerring, 2016).

4. CASE STUDIES: LABOUR REFORMS IN THE GCC

4.1. Qatar

4.1.1. Overview of Reforms and Policy Framing

Over the past decade, Qatar has undertaken a series of significant labour reforms, particularly in the context of heightened international scrutiny following the awarding to the state of the FIFA World Cup 2022 (Calo, 2023; Te Haar, 2018). These reforms have been framed both as part of a broader modernisation trajectory, on the one hand, and, as a response to international labour standards and human rights commitments – particularly in light of increased global engagement – on the other hand (Diop et al., 2024; Foley and Piper, 2024).

Key legislative developments include the progressive dismantling of core elements of the kafala system. Notably, reforms removed the requirement for a “No Objection Certificate (NOC)”, allowing workers greater mobility between employers, and abolished exit permit



requirements for a portion of migrant workers. In addition, the introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage under Law No. 17 of 2020 marked a significant policy shift, alongside earlier measures such as the “Wage Protection System” and enhanced protections against passport confiscation (Diop et al., 2024; Calo, 2023).

Institutionally, Qatar has also strengthened its labour governance framework through the establishment of “Labour Dispute Settlement Committees”, aimed at improving access to justice while aligning domestic mechanisms with international standards (Calo, 2023). These reforms have been accompanied by deepened engagement with international organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022),² as well as the accession to key international human rights treaties in 2018, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

From a policy perspective, these developments have been framed by Qatari authorities as forming part of a broader commitment to improving labour conditions, enhancing regulatory transparency, and positioning the country as a regional leader in labour reform (Government Communications Office, 2024). This narrative has also been reinforced through international partnerships and public-facing discourse, which have frequently emphasised alignment with global standards and ethical responsibility in labour governance (Foley and Piper, 2024).

4.1.2. Implementation Gaps

Despite the scope and ambition of these reforms, a substantial body of scholarship and evidence highlights persistent gaps between formal legal changes and their practical implementation (Calo, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2025, Amnesty International, 2023). A recurring concern relates to the continued imbalance of power between employers and migrant workers, which limits the effective realisation of newly established rights.

² One of the most notable being the entering of a technical cooperation agreement with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2017.



Empirical studies indicate that, while legal barriers to job mobility have been formally reduced, workers may still face informal constraints, inclusive of employer retaliation, administrative hurdles, or lack of awareness of their rights (Piper and Saraswathi, 2024). Similarly, although the introduction of a minimum wage represents a significant advancement made, challenges remain in ensuring its consistent enforcement across sectors.

The functioning of dispute resolution mechanisms also presents some mixed outcomes. While Labour Dispute Settlement have improved formally workers' access to legal remedies, issues such as procedural delays, limited enforcement power and barriers to accessing the system itself continue to affect their effectiveness (Calo, 2023).

A particularly significant gap relates to the continued exclusion or limited protection of certain categories of workers, most notably domestic workers and those operating within more informal or less regulated segments of the labour market. While formal reforms have expanded legal protections in principle, their reach remains practically uneven. Domestic workers often experience barriers to accessing dispute resolution mechanisms, face restrictions linked to the private nature of their workplace, and remain more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. These challenges are compounded by factors such as isolation, dependency on employers and, limited oversight, which together constrain the effective realisation of rights despite existing legal guarantees (ILO, 2024; Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024; Elsayed, 2024).

More broadly, scholars point to a structural disconnect between legal reform and underlying social relations, in particular within a labour market marked by strong hierarchies and divides between citizens and migrant workers. This has led to what some describe as a “dual system” of rights application, in which formal protections coexist alongside persistent inequalities in practice (Foley and Piper, 2024).

Nevertheless, several analyses caution against interpreting Qatar's labour reforms as fully transformative, noting that significant structural inequalities and forms of labour dependency continue to persist despite important legislative progress (Piper and Saraswathi, 2024; Foley and Piper, 2024; De Bel-Air and Shah, 2025).



4.2. United Arab Emirates

4.2.1. Overview of Reforms

Over the past decade, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has equally introduced a range of labour reforms aimed at updating its labour governance framework and responding to increasing international attention on migrant workers' rights and employment conditions. While reform trajectories across the GCC have varied in pace and scope, it can be said that the UAE has positioned itself as an early regional actor in introducing regulatory changes with regards to wage protection, contractual transparency, and labour mobility (Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024; Elsayed, 2024).

Unlike for Qatar, these reforms should also be situated within broader Gulf governance systems, historically characterised by temporary migration regimes, sponsorship structures, and differentiated citizenship frameworks shaping labour relations across the entire region (De Bel-Air and Shah, 2025).

Within the reform efforts spectrum, a significant development occurred with the adoption of Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 on the Regulation of Labour Relations, which introduced multiple reforms on employment contracts, anti-discrimination protections, flexible work arrangements, and labour dispute procedures (Khoja and Sarit, 2024). The reforms also formally removed the requirement for a “No Objection Certificate” (NOC) for several categories of migrant workers, thereby facilitating greater labour mobility inside the country (ILO, 2024; UAE Government Portal, 2024).

Earlier reforms had also included the establishment of the “Wage Protection System” (WPS) – initially introduced in 2009 – which sought to improve salary payment compliance through a system of electronic wage transfer complemented by some monitoring mechanisms. More recent measures have reinforced provisions targeting equal pay, the prohibition of workplace discrimination, and the formalisation of employment relationships through fixed-term standardised contracts (Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024; Elsayed, 2024).



From a policy perspective, UAE authorities have framed these reforms within broader narrative of economic diversification, competitiveness, and institutional modernisation. Public-facing discourse has often emphasised the country’s ambition to align labour governance with international standards while maintaining social stability and economic attractiveness for global investment. Compared to Qatar, however, reform narratives in and from the UAE appear less connected to external event-driven scrutiny and more closely integrated into long-term state modernisation desire as well as economic strategies (UAE Government Portal, 2024; UAE Ministry of Foreign affairs, 2024). Nevertheless, recent scholarship also cautions against interpreting these reforms as fully transformative, arguing instead that many GCC labour reforms continue to operate within broader migration governance structures that preserve some differentiated forms of vulnerability and labour dependency (De Bel-Air and Shah, 2025).

4.2.2. Implementation Gaps

Despite the breadth of legislative reforms introduced in recent years, substantial concerns remain with regards to the implementation and effective enforcement of labour protections in practice, particularly so for lower-income and domestic migrant workers who continue to face heightened vulnerability to exploitation, wage theft, and barriers to legal remedy notably (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024).

While reforms have improved formal labour mobility and contractual security, several studies note that power imbalance phenomena between employers and migrant workers persist in practice. Migrant workers may continue to experience dependency deriving from recruitment practices, debt burdens, fear of retaliation, or limited awareness of available legal protection as well as complaint mechanisms (Elsayed, 2024; Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024).

Domestic workers are especially vulnerable due to the isolated nature of their work environment coupled with the comparatively weaker oversight mechanisms applicable within these private households. In that sense, scholars and rights organisations note that such domestic workers may still face increased exposure to abuse, excessive working



time, mobility restrictions, and obstacles in accessing the complaint or dispute resolution systems (Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

More broadly, critics argue that while reforms have modernised important aspects of labour governance, they have not fundamentally transformed the differentiated legal and social treatments and hierarchical structures which continue to shape labour relations across the Gulf region and include the UAE. In this regard, reforms have been understood as improving regulatory efficiency and reinforcing international legitimacy without fully dismantling the underlying conditions or causes of dependency associated with Gulf migration governance systems (De Bel-Air and Shah, 2025; Elsayed, 2024).

5. ANALYSIS: ETHICS, REFORM AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE

5.1. Ethical Narratives and Reform Legitimacy

The labour reforms undertaken in Qatar and in the United Arab Emirates illustrate that contemporary labour governance in the GCC region is increasingly framed through broader ethical, rights-based, and governance-oriented narratives. In both case studies, reforms have been associated with commitments to dignity, fairness, social responsibility considerations and alignment with international labour and human rights standards. While the specific trajectories and political contexts differ, both states have sought to situate their labour reform within larger policy visions of modernisation, responsible or good governance, and international engagement.

In the case of Qatar, reform processes were closely linked to heightened international scrutiny surrounding the FIFA World Cup 2022 and the country's increasing interactions with institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). The reform discourse frequently emphasised ethical responsibility, transparency, and alignment with labour standards while positioning it within broader efforts to modernise governance and strengthen protection for migrant workers (Foley and Piper, 2024; Calo, 2023). By contrast, reform narratives in the UAE have generally been framed less through external factors or pressure, and more through state-led visions of economic diversification,



desire for competitiveness, tolerance and institutional modernisation (UAE Government Portal, 2024; Monier, 2024).

These developments would suggest a trend of ethical narratives operating as part of governance legitimacy-building processes within the GCC. Beyond the justification of reforms, Human rights language, references to dignity, and discourses surrounding the notions of fairness and inclusion also contribute to international and domestic production of state legitimacy. In this context, ethical discourse may simultaneously serve normative, political, and strategic functions.

The growing role of interfaith and dialogue-based initiatives further reflects this broader collision between ethics, governance, and diplomatic legitimacy. Frameworks such as the OHCHR “Faith for Rights” initiative and the Bangkok Declaration on Faith and Human Rights seek to present religious ethics and human rights principles as cohesive and mutually reinforcing rather than inherently opposed (OHCHR, 2019; OHCHR, 2025). Observations drawn from direct participation in the Sixth Faith for Rights Annual Meeting and Peer-to-Peer Learning (Siem Reap and Bangkok, 2025) reveal how interfaith dialogue spaces operate as practical sites of exchange between human rights actors, faith leaders, academics, and policymakers. Discussions of the gathering repeatedly emphasised dignity, coexistence, compassionate accountability, and the relationship between rights and responsibilities as shared ethical foundations capable of supporting social cohesion, changes, and peaceful coexistence. The meeting further reflected ongoing efforts to frame human rights not in opposition to religious or cultural traditions, but through locally resonant ethical vocabularies and shared moral commitments (OHCHR, 2025).

Within the GCC context specifically, such initiatives may contribute to framing human rights and reforms in ways that will be perceived as more culturally and socially legitimate from a local normative environment standpoint. Interfaith dialogue thus can be said to function not merely as a symbolic engagement process, but also as a potential mechanism through which international norms are translated, adapted, or socially embedded within local governance contexts (Driessen, 2025).

Notwithstanding the above, scholars caution that ethical and tolerance-based narratives may also serve as instruments of soft power and international image management.



Monier (2024), for instance, argues that discourses surrounding tolerance and interreligious coexistence in parts of the Gulf can reinforce international legitimacy as well as state branding strategies, without necessarily resolving the underlying inequalities and structural vulnerabilities affecting migrant communities.

5.2. Structural Limits: Between Reform and Lived Reality

While labour reforms introduced across the GCC have resulted in substantial legislative and led to institutional developments, the case studies also reveal the persistence of significant implementation gaps and structural inequalities. This echoes a central concern of contemporary socio-legal scholarship: the differentiation of legal reform from lived social realities.

In both Qatar and UAE, reforms have expanded formal legal protections frameworks relating to labour mobility, wage regulation, contractual relationships formalisation and standardisation, and access to dispute resolution mechanisms. Nevertheless, evidence from international organisations, academic scholarship, and available rights-based monitoring continues to point towards recurring vulnerabilities affecting migrant workers, particularly so within lower-income sectors, domestic and informal environments (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024).

A notable issue concerns the continued imbalance of power between employers and migrant workers on the ground, which can affect and limit the effectiveness of reforms despite important legal steps. Workers may continue to face practical dependency in relation to the whole life cycle of employment and including recruitment processes, fear of retaliation during and after, limited awareness and availability of legal protection, or barriers to complaint mechanisms (Elsayed 2024; Piper and Saraswathi, 2024). In this sense, reforms have not fully dismantled the broader migrant governance structures, dynamics and social hierarchies historically associated with, and deriving from, the kafala systems.

This tension is especially visible in the context of domestic work and other less regulated or informal sectors. The expansion in scope of legal protections does not preclude their



uneven practical implementation due to limited oversight mechanisms, workplace isolation and invisibility, and difficulties in autonomously accessing remedies or dispute resolution systems. It stems from the afore that critical gaps remain between the normative framing of reform and the material conditions that many workers continue to experience in practice.

These dynamics also demonstrate the limitations of ethical and rights-based narratives when these fail to be accompanied by deeper institutional transformation and effective consistent enforcement mechanisms. While ethical framing contributes to legitimising reform agendas, it cannot automatically translate into tangible improvements in individuals' lived realities. Consequently, a risk remains that ethical discourse becomes primarily symbolic and used in isolation while deeply entrenched societal inequalities and dependency dynamics persist.

At the same time, it appears simplistic to dismiss the reforms as superficial or performative. Both countries have undertaken reforms that would have appeared unlikely within the region only a decade earlier, even more so with regards to labour conditions. The reforms thus can be said to reflect both genuine political will and institutional change, as well as the continued limitations of gradual reform processes operating within politically and economically sensitive contexts.

5.3. Human Rights, Dignity and Conditions to Sustainable Peace

The case studies at hand ultimately demonstrate that labour governance, human rights, and ethical frameworks are closely interconnected within broader questions touching upon sustainable peace and social flourishing. As outlined in early sections, sustainable peace extends in fact way beyond the absence of direct conflict and can conceptually include the presence of justice, dignity, social inclusion and stable institutional relations (Galtung, 1969/2018; Richmond, 2020).

From this lens, labour reforms may also contribute positively to sustainable peace when their impact reduces structural inequalities, prevent exploitation, and enhances the overall dignity and agency of workers. Legal protections relating to mobility, wages,



access to remedies and protection from abuse are thus in fact not solely about labour governance, but instead form part of broader processes through which social trust, institutional legitimacy, societal stability, and perceptions of fairness are constructed. In this regard, labour governance becomes part of the larger architecture through which societies negotiate inclusion, belonging, and perceptions of justice between individuals and state institutions.

Furthermore, the analysis also suggests that sustainable peace ought not to be reduced to the presence of reform discourse or legal reform alone. Where implementation gaps are observed and persist, and where structural vulnerabilities affecting an important portion of individuals remain inadequately addressed, ethical narratives risk being disconnected from realities and hence, undermined. In such contexts, the contribution of reform processes to sustainable peace remains partial and seemingly fragile.

Interfaith dialogue and faith-based ethical engagement nevertheless retain valuable potential within this landscape. By facilitating dialogue across cultural, political, and normative boundaries, such initiatives can contribute to reducing polarisation, fostering tolerance and coexistence, and reinforcing shared understandings of dignity and human responsibility. Frameworks such as “Faith for Rights” further illustrate concrete attempts to reconcile universal human rights norms with locally embedded ethical and religious traditions.

That being said, the findings of this paper suggest that ethical and faith-informed discourse alone is also insufficient in the pursuit of rights realisation, guarantee or sustainable peace outcomes. Rather, their material contribution depends largely on the extent to which such ethical commitments are transversally infused into effective governance practices, institutional accountability, and meaningful improvements in everyday lived conditions.

Ultimately, the GCC labour reform experience showcases both the possibilities and limitations of ethics-based approaches to governance. Ethical narratives, interfaith engagement, and rights-based discourse may very well contribute to shaping more inclusive and socially legitimate reform environments. Yet sustainable peace taken largely requires more than normative recognition alone; it also necessitates the



substantive institutionalisation of dignity, justice, and protection throughout the entire social and labour governance systems.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to examine how ethical frameworks, labour reforms, and interfaith dialogue intersect within the context of post-kafala reform processes in the GCC, focusing primarily on Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. It emerged from the assessment that recent labour reforms across the region have introduced significant legal and institutional developments, particularly in the areas of labour mobility, wage protection, contractual regulation, and dispute resolution mechanisms. At the same time, these reforms have been accompanied by growing and broader ethical, rights-based, and faith-informed narratives centred on dignity, inclusion, tolerance, and responsible governance.

The comparative study further suggests that ethical narratives along with interfaith engagement may contribute to strengthening the legitimacy and social acceptability of reform processes, especially so in contexts where global human rights norms interact with locally inspired political, cultural, and religious frameworks. Initiative such as the OHCHR “Faith for Rights” framework, as well as other interfaith and ethics-based dialogue spaces, illustrate increasing efforts to ensure human rights discourse remains connected to broader moral and spiritual vocabularies in order to fluidify dialogue, foster coexistence, and social cohesion across diverse actors and communities (OHCHR, 2025).

That being said, the findings equally shed light on the limits of ethical discourse where legal reform is not consistently accompanied and reflected into the lived realities. This also reflects broader critiques within business and human rights scholarship highlighting the persistent gap between formal regulatory commitments and effective protection of rights-holders in practice (Deva, 2021). Despite important legislative progress, notable implementation gaps persist across both case studies – in particular concerning



imbalanced power relations, access to the remedies, leaving migrant and domestic workers vulnerable. In this regard, the paper argues that ethical narratives alone are not sufficient to contribute to rights realisation or sustainable peace. Instead, it purports that sustainable peace outcomes require the meaningful embedding of dignity, fairness, and accountability within everyday governance structures and across social relations.

The findings therefore suggest that both ethical frameworks and interfaith dialogue can and should contribute to the advancement of human rights and to the conditions conducive of sustainable peace within the GCC, but only under certain conditions. Their contribution remains contingent upon the extent to which such commitments are translated into substantive protections and materially experienced by affected individuals.

Recent multilateral and interfaith initiatives further demonstrate that questions of ethics, peaceful coexistence, and dignity become more and more integrated into discussions surrounding the future of global governance, peacebuilding and international cooperation (Globethics, 2025). Similarly, from such discussions emerge the idea that sustainable peace cannot and should be reduced solely to security arrangements, legal compliance, or economic modernisation. Rather, it depends upon the capacity of institutions and societies to foster meaningful inclusion, mutual recognition, and respect for human dignity across different communities and identities (Richmond, 2020).

Within the GCC context specifically, labour reform trajectories reveal both the possibilities and limitations of ethics-informed governance. While it appears that ethical and faith-based narratives may assist in legitimising reform processes and facilitating engagement across normative systems, their long-term credibility and utility ultimately rely on whether commitments to dignity, pluralism, and equal protection transpire in practice, including towards vulnerable and marginalised groups. In this sense, the GCC experience, alongside the broader question of sustainable peace, illustrates the importance of critically assessing how such narratives are operationalised and (in)consistently reflected in society, all the while reaffirming the relevance of dignity, dialogue-, and coexistence-based approaches to governance in an era marked by shifting global orders and renewed tensions surrounding pluralism, identity, and social cohesion.



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