



The Glass Palace: Illusions of Freedom and Democracy in Qatar

Nasser M. Beydoun

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When Americans read in today's news that Qatar is funding rebel groups across the Middle East, few of us have any idea what Qatar is or how it is run. A nation of perhaps 250,000 locals served by 1.35 million foreign workers, the emirate is burning its gas and oil revenue at a break-neck pace in an effort to build a position on the global stage. Is Qatar actually a suitable ally or a legitimate partner for the United States? Under Qatari labor law, foreign workers are actually owned, for all practical purposes, by their Qatari sponsors in a system akin to slavery. This book chronicles the experience of an American executive working in Qatar and delves into Qatar's feudal work-sponsorship system, showing that an economic great leap forward is not necessarily accompanied by modernization, despite superficial emblems; that prosperity and democracy need not go hand in hand; and that being a US ally may be totally unrelated to any notion of human rights or personal liberties. There are other Western expats still trapped in Qatar. Yet American workers, students and others blithely interact with Qatar as if it were a 'normal' (i.e., Westernized) nation where one may navigate with confidence. It is nothing of the sort. In the meantime Qatar, under the leadership of an emir who overthrew his own father, is fostering international unrest across the entire Arab world, while racing to build a modern-looking city from scratch. Some of the economic, environmental and demographic assumptions underlying these plans are worthy of another 1000 tales from Arabia. American businessman Nasser Beydoun found out for himself how quickly the Qataris are moving when he embarked on an exciting new career path, leaving his hometown of Dearborn, Michigan, to move to Qatar to manage the opening of several chain restaurants as part of the sudden economic boom there. It didn't take long for the deal to turn sour, but Beydoun didn't realize the extent of his problem until he tried to leave the country — and was stopped at the border. In this book he paints a general picture of life in this fantastical realm while relaying his personal struggle to escape a legal runaround worthy of Kafka's novels.

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