



IMMIGRATION DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MENA REGION

Please visit our dedicated microsite <https://www.fragomen.com/about/news/immigration-update-coronavirus> for details on worldwide immigration and travel restrictions due to COVID-19 pandemic.

United Arab Emirates

31 March 2023 – New Regulations Provide Clarification on Important Aspects of the Immigration Process

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has published new regulations which supplement the existing immigration rules by outlining eligibility and other conditions for entry to the UAE and for the issuance of various visas, and by implementing new visa categories, among other matters. The new law provides much awaited clarification on some important aspects of the UAE immigration process. Although the law has been in force since October 2022, it was officially published only in March 2023.

New visa categories

The new regulations implement several visa categories that were not included in the reformed [law regulating entry and residency of foreign nationals](#) nor in its [executive regulations](#), namely:

- *a visa for officially wanted persons* – issued at a request of the competent authorities in the UAE;
- *a visa for staff working onboard cruise ships* – issued to an employee working onboard a cruise ship or excursion boat (this includes crew members, sailors and seamen);
- *a visa for truck drivers* – issued by UAE consular posts abroad and at land borders to a foreign national engaged in the transportation of commodities;
- *a visa for residents of neighboring border territories* – issued at the land borders to a foreign resident of a neighboring border territory whose profession falls outside of the labourers category; and
- *a special entry permit* – issued to members of official delegations.

General conditions of entry visas

The new law sets out general conditions of UAE entry visas, including the validity (i.e. 60 days from the date of issue of an entry visa, except the *visa for residents of neighboring foreign border territories* which is issued with the validity of 90 days); the maximum allowable duration of stay (i.e. up to 180 days, depending on the purpose of entry); permissible number of entries (i.e. for single- or multiple-entry); and whether an extension of stay is permissible. The new law does not enforce any changes to entry conditions for individuals who are visa-exempt or eligible for a visa-on-arrival based on the previously-issued relevant legislation.

The below table illustrates select visa conditions included in the new regulations:

Visa category (purpose of entry)	Allowable duration of stay	Conditions for the extension of stay in the UAE
<i>Visa for tourism¹</i>	30 or 60 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 120 days. Further extension (for a total of 180 days) at the discretion of the issuing authority.
<i>Visa for visiting relatives or friends</i>	30, 60 or 90 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 180 days.
<i>Visa for exploring job opportunities</i>	60, 90 or 120 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 180 days.
<i>Visa for exploring business opportunities</i>	60, 90 or 120 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 180 days.
<i>Visa for medical treatment</i>	90 or 180 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 180 days.
<i>Visa for study, training, gaining qualifications</i>	30, 60, 90 or 180 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 180 days.
<i>Courtesy visa</i>	30, 60 or 90 days	Possible extension of stay (once or multiple times) for a total of 180 days.
<i>Visa for residents of neighboring border territories</i>	48 hours ²	Non-extendable.
<i>Visa for truck drivers</i>	30, 60 or 90 days	Non-extendable.
<i>Visa for staff working onboard cruise ships</i>	180 days	Non-extendable.
<i>Visa for work assignment</i>	90 days	Possible one-time extension subject to the approval of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization.

<i>Visa for officially wanted persons</i>	180 days	Non-extendable.
<i>Visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them</i>	30 days	Possible one-time extension for additional 30 days.
<i>Visa for persons accompanying GCC nationals³</i>	60 days	Possible extension (once or multiple times) for a total of 120 days. Further extension of stay (for a total of 180 days) at the discretion of the issuing authority.
<i>Visa for nationals of India holding immigration status in the EU, UK, or US</i>	14 days	Possible one-time extension for additional 14 days.

Professions eligible for select visa categories

The new law introduces the following two occupation lists which limit certain applicants (as noted below) to working in a specific profession:

- a first list of 670 job titles classified in professional levels 1, 2 and 3⁴ is used in the issuance of *the visa for visiting relatives or friends, and the visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them*; and
- a second list of 188 professions is used in the issuance of *the visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them*.

Minimum validity of a travel document required for entry

The new law provides the list of categories of individuals who may enter the UAE even if the validity of their travel document does not meet the standard six-month requirement (however, in any case, the minimum validity of the travel document at the time of entry must not be less than one month). This includes airline cabin crew members, staff working onboard cruise ships, and holders of *a visa for transit*.

Visa for tourism⁵

Per the new law, *the visit visa for tourism* is issued only if the sponsor holds a business license to operate in the tourism sector (this includes travel agencies, airlines, and hotels), and if the official travel agenda of the applicant is provided. In the addendum to the law (i.e. Schedule E), a unified System Operational Guide is introduced, which explains the way the visa quota is granted to the sponsor, and an amount that must be deposited by the sponsor against each visa application.

Visa for visiting relatives or friends

The new law sets out the following categories of individuals who may qualify for *the visa for visiting relatives or friends*:

- a relative or a friend of an Emirati national, irrespective of the degree of kinship; and
- a first or second degree relative of a foreign resident in the UAE who is employed in one of the approved occupations.

Visa for nationals of India holding immigration status in the European Union, United Kingdom, or the United States of America

The new law provides that the nationals of India holding a residency status in the European Union or in the United Kingdom, or a visa or green card issued by the United States of America (in all cases the visa must have a minimum validity of six months) are eligible for a renewable 14-day single-entry visa-on-arrival for a fee.

Visa for exploring business opportunities

The new law clarifies that *the visa for exploring business opportunities* may be issued by the UAE immigration authorities or by the country's consular post abroad to a foreign national with an adequate financial solvency, seeking to establish a business in the field they currently work in their home country. It can also be issued to individuals with exceptional talent, capabilities, or qualifications, subject to approval of the competent federal authorities in the UAE.

Visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them

The new law stipulates that *the visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them* may be issued upon arrival in the UAE to a foreign national holding a residence permit in any of the GCC member countries, provided that the applicant's profession is from one of the lists of approved occupations. The residence permit issued by the GCC state must be valid for a minimum one year. The applicant may be accompanied by spouse, children, and domestic workers.

Visa for persons accompanying GCC nationals⁶

The new law provides that individuals accompanying GCC nationals, including their foreign spouses, children, and domestic workers may be issued a visa upon arrival in the UAE if travelling with the principal (the UAE authorities may exempt the foreign national from this condition).

Green Residency Visa for an investor and business partner

The new law clarifies that a foreign national seeking to obtain *the Green Residency Visa for an investor and business partner* must invest a minimum AED one million in cash in a new or existing business in the UAE, and that the business must be one of the approved corporate forms in accordance with the UAE Commercial Companies Law and the approved investor classification⁷. The individual must ensure that they always meet the required visa eligibility criteria (should they fail to meet one or more such criteria, they are required to notify the visa issuing authority). Furthermore, an investor who does not meet one or more eligibility conditions for this category, at the discretion of the immigration authorities, may obtain a standard residency visa with a validity of two years (instead of five years as it is in the case of the Green Visa scheme).

Residence permit for humanitarian cases

Per the new law, a two-year residence permit may be issued to a national of a country which is classified by the UAE authorities as a country suffering from instability, wars, or disasters, provided that the applicant is in the UAE, has a host or a guarantor, suitable

accommodation, and sufficient financial means to support themselves. The affected individual may also sponsor a residence permit for their dependents whether they are inside or outside the UAE.

Residence permit for family residency⁸

A two-year residence permit may be issued to a relative of an individual in the UAE, subject to providing evidence of kinship, suitable accommodation, and financial solvency of the principal (Emirati nationals seeking to sponsor a residence permit for their foreign relatives are exempt from evidencing the last two requirements). Foreign nationals may sponsor a residence permit for the following relatives only:

- parents (including in-laws of the principal’s wife);
- minor brothers; and
- minor children of the principal’s wife, subject to providing relevant custody documents.

Foreign nationals must have a monthly income of at least AED 10,000 to sponsor residence permit for up to five relatives, and at least AED 15,000 in case of six relatives. Additional salary requirements may apply in the case of sponsoring visas for more than six relatives.

Maximum allowable duration of stay outside the UAE

The new law expands on categories that are exempt from the provision which invalidates a residence permit if the holder remains outside the UAE continuously for 180 days or more. The residence permit of the following additional categories will remain valid until the expiry date, even if the individual remains outside the UAE continuously for 180 days or more:

- holders of a Golden Visa, including their relatives;
- holders of a Green Visa, including their relatives; and
- individuals who have received an approval from the immigration authorities, upon filing an application for [a permit to re-enter the UAE](#).

Maximum allowable duration of stay in the UAE post residence permit expiry or cancellation

The new law introduces a grace period allowing foreign nationals whose residence permit has expired or has been cancelled, to remain in the UAE without being fined for overstaying. This grace period is intended for an individual to either change their immigration status (i.e. by obtaining a new visa) or leave the country:

Category	Allowable duration of stay post residence permit expiry or cancellation
<i>Holders of a Golden Visa, including their relatives</i>	180 days
<i>Holders of a Green Visa, including their relatives</i>	
<i>Widows or divorced females with a residence permit in the UAE</i>	
<i>Students, following the expiry of their study period</i>	

<i>Foreign parents, spouses, and children of an Emirati national</i>		
<i>Holders of a residence permit issued with a job title classified as professional level 1, 2, or 3 as per the approved occupational list</i>	90 days	
<i>Property owners</i>		
<i>Holders of a residence permit for humanitarian cases with a sponsor or a guarantor</i>	60 days	
<i>All other categories</i>	30 days	

In addition to the above, the new regulations set out procedures that the foreign national should follow in the case of damage or loss of passport or identity card, and provides information on financial solvency, accommodation, and select documentary requirements in the case of residence permit without work (for a UAE sponsor).

Fragomen will continue monitoring the situation and will revert with additional information as developments occur.

Footnotes

¹ This applies to a standard *visa for tourism* which requires a UAE sponsor.

² The maximum allowable duration of stay as referred to in the addendum to the new law (i.e. Schedule A) is 90 days which differs from the duration of stay referred to in the article implementing this visa category which is maximum 48 hours. Fragomen understands that the correct maximum allowable duration of stay under this visa category is 48 hours.

³ Per the addendum to the new law (i.e. Schedule A), *the visa for persons accompanying GCC nationals* is a standalone visa category, although in another part of the regulations, it is referred to as one of the cases for the issuance of *the visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them*. For the purpose of this News Flash, Fragomen considers it to be a separate visa category as terms 'GCC nationals' and 'GCC residents' are not interchangeable.

⁴ It is not clear if the list fully aligns with [the Occupational Classification Scheme](#) of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization.

⁵ This applies to a standard *visa for tourism* which requires a UAE sponsor.

⁶ Per the addendum to the new law (i.e. Schedule A), *the visa for persons accompanying GCC nationals* is a standalone visa category, although in another part of the regulations, it is referred to as one of the cases for the issuance of *the visa for GCC residents and persons accompanying them*. For the purpose of this News Flash, Fragomen considers it to be a separate visa category as terms 'GCC nationals' and 'GCC residents' are not interchangeable.

⁷ Schedule C of the law provides a classification of investors based on an annual revenue.

⁸ This category falls under humanitarian cases per the new law. However, relatives of foreign nationals holding other categories of the UAE residence permit, including Green Visa and Golden Visa are subject to separate regulations and may qualify for a residence permit with a validity longer than two years and under different conditions.

Saudi Arabia

14 March 2023 - E-Visa Now Available for Gulf Cooperation Council Residents of All Professions

Effective immediately, foreign nationals with residency status in a Gulf Cooperation Council member state are eligible to apply for a single- or multiple-entry e-electronic visa (e-visa) to enter Saudi Arabia for tourism purposes, regardless of their profession.

GCC residents are now eligible to obtain the e-visa by applying through the [Visit Saudi online platform](#), provided that their residency permit is valid for at least three months from the date of e-visa application and their passport is valid for at least six months.

The e-visa costs SAR 300 (USD 80) and can only be issued after the applicant purchases health insurance valid for their entire duration of stay in Saudi Arabia. The e-visa can be issued for single- or multiple-entry and allows holders to travel to Saudi Arabia for tourism purposes.

The expansion of the eligibility for the e-visa also applies to accompanying first-degree relatives, i.e., parents, spouses, and children of the residency holder, and domestic workers arriving with their GCC resident sponsors.

In September 2019, Saudi Arabia introduced the e-visa program which initially could only be utilized by individuals from a select 49 countries. Two years later, [the government expanded the e-visa program to GCC residents in select occupations](#).

31 March 2023 - Professional Verification Scheme Announced for Select Sri Lankan Nationals Applying for Saudi Visas

Saudi Arabia's [Professional Verification scheme](#) has expanded in a new phase to select nationals of Sri Lanka who will soon be required to have their skills evaluated in their home country prior to obtaining a Saudi work visa. This follows the initial launch of the program in January 2021, which was followed by the implementation of the second and third phases of the program that expanded the scheme to nationals of [Pakistan](#), [India](#), and [Bangladesh](#).

Sri Lankan nationals seeking employment in Saudi Arabia in select 23 technical-based professions such as electricians and auto mechanics will soon need to undergo theoretical and practical tests to evaluate their skills before they can obtain an entry work visa for Saudi Arabia. This new requirement stems from a collaboration between Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) and Sri Lanka Tertiary Vocational Education Commission (TVEC). The latter will oversee the process commonly referred to in Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia as the Skill Verification Program (SVP).

It is anticipated that similar to other jurisdictions participating in the scheme, those who pass the test with a minimum score of 50% will be issued an internationally recognized certification with a five-year validity that will allow them to apply for an entry visa to work in Saudi Arabia.

As of today, Saudi Arabia is hosting roughly 150,000 Sri Lankan workers of which 70% fall into the unskilled workers category.

[The Professional Verification scheme](#) was launched by the MHRSD in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation in 2021, to evaluate skills of foreign nationals working or seeking work in Saudi Arabia. The initial phase of the program was focused on foreign nationals who were already working in Saudi Arabia (affecting over 1,000 professions across 23 sectors), with subsequent

phases launching in [Pakistan](#), [India](#), then [Bangladesh](#). Saudi Arabia is expected to apply the scheme to nationals from other countries in future phases.

As the implementation of the scheme in other countries, it is expected that all expenses associated with the program must be covered by the Saudi employer or the applicant's sponsor, including the work visa, travel tickets, medical and police report.

The expansion of the Professional Verification Scheme may limit the pool of available candidates for Saudi employers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Due to this additional step in the recruitment process, the overall processing timeframe and employment costs are expected to increase for affected applicants.

Iraqi Kurdistan

01 March 2023 - Electronic Visit Visa Portal Launched

The Kurdistan Regional Government has launched a [visa portal](#) that allows foreign nationals to apply for an electronic visa (e-visa) to visit Iraqi Kurdistan for the purpose of tourism, education, business, or work.

Visa conditions

The single-entry e-visa is valid for 90 days from the date of issuance and permits stays of up to 30 days in the Iraqi Kurdistan. The e-visa cannot be used for travel into federal Iraq. Individuals carrying a passport or travel document stating that their place of birth is Iraq are not required to apply for an e-visa to enter Iraqi Kurdistan.

Eligibility conditions and e-visa application process

Applicant's passport must be valid for a minimum of six months at the time of application and have at least one blank page.

Nationals from countries on [Country List A](#) may apply for the e-visa by completing the required information on the electronic portal, and their application will be processed immediately after they have paid the visa fee of IQD 100,000 (approximately USD 70).

However, those from countries on [Country List B](#) must have a guarantor in the Iraqi Kurdistan (a sponsor registered with the Ministry of Interior, e.g.: a law firm, or a manpower company) who will support the application process by providing a unique verification code and arranging the payment for the visa on the applicant's behalf. The guarantor will be notified once the application has been processed which takes up to five working days.

Additionally, nationals from countries on Country List A may obtain a visa upon arrival in the Iraqi Kurdistan; they must pay the required visa fee with a Visa or Mastercard credit card.

Foreign visitors traveling to Iraqi Kurdistan on the invitation of oil and gas companies, or as government contractors, must obtain a pre-approval from the relevant ministry (typically the Ministry of Natural Resources) before they submit their visa application with the Ministry of Interior.

In October 2022, the Kurdistan Regional Government announced a [Digital Transformation Strategy](#) which aims to digitalize all public services in government establishments and institutions in order to offer greater transparency and efficiency by 2025.

The e-visa portal aims to help boost tourism and foreign investment in the Iraqi Kurdistan and is one of many initiatives that are expected to streamline the communication process with the government authorities.

09 March 2023 – Updated Guidelines for Social Security Subscription Affecting Work Permit Applications

Effective immediately, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs has issued new guidelines for social security subscriptions and nationalization requirements that employers must follow in order to be issued initial or renewed work permits for their employees.

The new guidelines require employers to submit a company stamped letter reflecting the names of all employees along with their salaries from 2022 and 2023, showing that their salaries increased year over year. Employers must also submit employment contracts signed by both parties by March 2023 to continue subscription to the social security. All employment contracts must be legalized by the legal department at the Social Security Directorate.

Furthermore, to continue benefiting from the social security program, the ratio of foreign workers in a company must not exceed 25% of their total employees.

If all of these requirements are followed, a Social Security clearance letter will be issued to the employer, which must be included with each work permit application.

Employers must register their employees with the Social Security Directorate as soon as possible and submit the employment agreements by the end of March 2023. Companies that do not meet the minimum nationalization ratio of 75% will need to start taking measures to reach it or sign a pledge letter stating the company will have the required ratio within two months. Otherwise, the Social Security Directorate will block services for the company.

05 April 2023 - Updated Guidelines for Residency Card Applications

The General Directorate of Citizenship and Residency has issued new instructions relaxing the requirements to facilitate the processing and issuance of the Residency Card for foreign nationals in Iraqi Kurdistan, in an effort to retain foreign talent.

Below are the changes that have been introduced:

Sponsorship Transfer - Foreign nationals can now change employers in-country irrespective of their job title category by submitting a residency card application to the Ministry of Interior. Previously, foreign nationals would have to cancel their respective residency card, exit Iraqi Kurdistan and then re-enter the country under the sponsorship of the new employer. For the sponsorship transfer the eligibility requirements continue to be the same as obtaining a new residency card, wherein the necessary documentation of a passport, employment agreement duly signed at the Notary Public and medical examination is completed, followed by submission of supporting documents to the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. The sponsorship transfer process fee is IQD 650,000

+ residency card issuance fee of IQD 175,000. Further details in terms of the validity of such transfer is unclear.

Social Security Directorate - Employers must now pay fines owed to Social Security Directorate in advance prior to receipt of the residency card and submit a declaration to confirm that they have registered their employee with the Social Security Directorate within six months from the date of application for the residency card. Employers who have not registered themselves with the Social Security Directorate and/or fail to register their employees must pay a fine of IQD 500,000 for each employee that is not registered. Previously, employers only had to submit the declaration with the Social Security Directorate within six months.

In-person Requirements - Foreign nationals are now required to attend the General Directorates of Citizenship and Residency in-person when obtaining a new or renewed residency card, including lost or damaged residency card. Previously, residency cards could be collected by the public relations officer by presenting a power of attorney on behalf of the foreign national.

Employers must ensure they register themselves and their employees with the Social Security Directorate to avoid being blocked from or delaying the issuance of residency cards and to avoid facing penalties. In addition to this, employers should advise their employees of the mandatory in-person requirement at the General Directorate of Citizenship and Residency to obtain their residency cards.

ABOUT FRAGOMEN

Fragomen is the world's leading single-focus provider of immigration services and support. Our firm is comprised of law practices and immigration consultancies that work together to support our clients across all regions globally. At Fragomen, we leverage our collective immigration experience to offer clients targeted and trusted solutions that help them achieve their local, regional and worldwide business goals.

Fragomen's team of dedicated immigration professionals has extensive experience in working with multinational businesses, local employers, start-ups and individual investors. We have a deep understanding of the region and maintain strong professional relationships with immigration authorities. Our MENA immigration team is supported on a global basis by over 3,800 immigration professionals in more than 50 offices worldwide. Together, we provide comprehensive immigration support in over 170 countries.

All we do is immigration, a sole focus that makes a considerable difference. Unlike many other providers, all of our thinking, passion and resources are dedicated to improving the immigration experiences of our clients and their employees. We have the track record, region specific experience and know-how to provide you with a streamlined and compliant immigration solution.

Visit our website www.fragomen.com or contact us at dubaiinfo@fragomen.com to learn more about our company and services.