

# QATAR 2023 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and sharia shall be “a main source” of legislation. According to the constitution, the Emir must be Muslim. The constitution guarantees the freedom to practice religious rites in accordance with “the maintenance of public order and morality.” The law punishes “offending” Islam or any of its rites or beliefs or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations constitute the registered religious groups in the country. Unregistered religious groups are illegal, but authorities generally permit them to practice their faith in private. Proselytizing for any faith other than Islam is prohibited.

In October, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) raised concerns regarding reports of discrimination of religious minorities in the country, including the Baha’i Faith community, some of whom are citizens. According to CESCR, Baha’is were subjected to administrative deportation and blacklisting, resulting in loss of employment and familial separation. In March, the Baha’i International Community stated to the UN Human Rights Council, “Qatar is slowly pursuing a number of actions which will ultimately lead to the eradication of one of its religious minorities from society: the members of the Baha’i Faith, many of whom were born in Qatar and whose families have been there for generations.” In November, the Baha’i Faith community reported its members had recently experienced increased government intimidation, stating that the government denied several Baha’i foreign residents security clearances or certificates of good conduct when offered new jobs. In November, English language daily the *New Indian Express* reported that the 19 Indian schools operating in the country had removed Diwali as an official school holiday because of a government order to do so. In May, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) hosted a one-day international symposium on Islamophobia.

According to the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se), the country's national curriculum and certain textbooks continued to include content that was antisemitic in nature. For the first time, in September, the government officially permitted Yom Kippur services to take place other than in a private residence.

There were again reports that cartoons, opinion articles, and news coverage in local newspapers and other media outlets periodically carried antisemitic content, which according to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and other organizations, increased following the Hamas October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's response in Gaza. In May, the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) worked with a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) to host an invitation-only conference to discuss moving from interfaith dialogue to interfaith cooperation. DICID invited Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders to speak and participate.

U.S. Department of State and U.S. embassy officials met with senior government officials, relevant government bodies, and quasigovernmental religious institutions concerning the rights of religious minorities, Sunni-Shia relations, and antisemitism. Throughout the year, embassy officers met with various faith communities, including the Hindu, Baha'i Faith, and evangelical Christian communities, and with the Christian Churches Steering Committee (CCSC), which oversees a variety of Christian denominations, to discuss issues of mutual concern. In May, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom participated in the DICID conference. During Ramadan, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith *suhoor* (morning meal before sunrise or after the fast-breaking evening meal during Ramadan) bringing together Muslim, Christian, and Jewish representatives. In September, the embassy helped facilitate the visit of a rabbi who conducted Jewish religious services.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.5 million (midyear 2023). Citizens make up approximately 11 percent of the population, while

noncitizens account for approximately 89 percent. Most citizens are Sunni Muslims, and almost all others are Shia Muslims.

The U.S. government estimates that as of 2020, Muslims are 62.5 percent of the total population, Christians 13.7 percent, Hindus 15.9 percent, and Buddhists 3.8 percent. Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database states Muslims are 78.5 percent of the population, Christians 13.1 percent, Hindus 3 percent, atheists and agnostics 2.2 percent, and Buddhists 1.8 percent. Expatriates include Hindus, almost exclusively from India and Nepal; Roman Catholics, primarily from the Philippines, Europe, and India; and Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and East Asia. Small groups include Anglicans and followers of other Protestant denominations, Egyptian Copts, Baha'is, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, as well as even smaller groups including followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sikhs, Jews, and Druze.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution declares Islam to be the state religion and states sharia shall be "a main source" of legislation. According to the constitution, the Emir must be Muslim. The constitution provides for hereditary rule by men in the Emir's branch of the Al Thani family. The Emir exercises full executive power. The constitution guarantees the "freedom to practice religious rites" to all persons "in accordance with the law and the requirements of the maintenance of public order and morality." It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion.

Conversion to another religion from Islam is defined by the law as apostasy and is illegal, although there have been no recorded punishments for apostasy since the country's independence in 1971.

The law provides for a prison sentence of up to seven years for offending or misinterpreting the Quran, “offending” Islam or its rites or beliefs, insulting any of the prophets, or defaming, desecrating, or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The law stipulates a seven-year prison term for producing or circulating material containing slogans, images, or symbols defaming these three religions. The law also prohibits publication of texts provoking social discord or religious strife, with punishment of up to six months in prison.

To obtain an official presence in the country, expatriate non-Muslim religious groups must register with the MFA. The only registered religious groups are Sunni and Shia Muslims and eight Christian denominations: the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Maronite, evangelical Protestant, and the Interdenominational Christian Churches. Protestant denominations other than the registered eight denominations, including nondenominational house churches, may register with the MFA with the CCSC’s support.

Registered groups may hold bank accounts in the organization’s name, apply for property to build worship spaces (or have already built structures, such as private villas, recognized as worship spaces), import religious texts such as Bibles or Qurans, and publish religious newsletters or flyers for internal distribution. Unregistered entities are unable to open accounts, solicit funds, acquire religious texts from outside the country, publish religiously themed newsletters or pamphlets, or legally hire staff.

Unregistered religious groups are illegal, but authorities generally permit them to practice their faith in private.

The law restricts public worship for non-Islamic faiths. It prohibits non-Muslim religious groups from displaying religious symbols, which includes banning Christian congregations from advertising religious services or placing crosses outdoors where they are visible to the public. The law criminalizes establishing or running an organization aimed at opposing or challenging Islam or promoting another religion and provides for

punishment of up to 10 years in prison. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam may result in a sentence of up to five years' imprisonment. The law calls for two years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 riyals (\$2,700) for possession of written or recorded materials or items that support or promote missionary activity.

The government regulates the publication, importation, and distribution of all religious books and materials. The government reviews, censors, or bans foreign newspapers, magazines, films, and books for objectionable sexual, religious, and political content. Registered religious groups may publish newsletters without government censorship but may only distribute them internally within their respective communities. Public bookstores are not allowed to sell Bibles. To import religious materials, groups must submit one copy to the Ministry of Culture and receive written approval before making large orders or risk having the entire shipment confiscated.

The only religions registered to have their own places of worship are Islam and Christianity. All mosques and Islamic institutions in the country, including Shia *housseiniyas* (congregation halls), must be registered with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA). The law designates the MEIA minister as the final authority for approving Islamic religious centers. The MFA approves Christian churches in coordination with the private office of the Emir. The Office of the Secretary General of the MFA, working in coordination with the director of the MFA's Human Rights Department, is responsible for handling church affairs.

A non-Muslim woman is not required by law to convert to Islam when marrying a Muslim; however, the law considers offspring of such a marriage to be Muslim. The law dictates that a non-Muslim man marrying a Muslim woman must convert to Islam. Marriages between two Muslims are performed at the Sharia Court in the Supreme Judicial Council. Marriages for religious minorities registered with the MFA – currently only Christian churches – may be performed by clergy recognized by the MFA and then registered with the Office of Land Registration and Legalization at the Ministry of Justice. Religious minorities not registered or not recognized by

the MFA – including members of the Baha'i, Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish faiths, and atheists – must get married abroad to receive marriage certificates and then undertake a legal process, first in the foreign country and then in Qatar, culminating with the MFA attesting to the certificate. There is no civil marriage.

Islamic instruction is compulsory in most schools, starting in preschool, although non-Muslims may opt out; community schools, which operate under the auspices of foreign embassies, do not require Islamic instruction as part of the core curriculum. Non-Muslims may provide private religious instruction for their children at home or in their faith services. All children may attend secular and coeducational private schools; non-Islamic formal religious education is prohibited.

A unified civil court system, incorporating sharia and secular law, has jurisdiction over both Muslims and non-Muslims. The unified court system applies sharia in family law cases, including those related to inheritance, marriage, divorce, and child custody. For Shia Muslims, a judicial panel decides cases regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other family matters using Shia interpretations of religious law. In other religious matters, family law applies across all branches of Islam. Non-Muslims are subject to sharia in cases of child custody, but civil law covers other personal status cases, including those related to divorce and inheritance.

A non-Muslim wife does not have the automatic right to inherit from her Muslim husband. She receives an inheritance only if her husband wills her a portion of his estate, and even then, she is eligible to receive only one-third of the total estate. A female heir generally receives one-half the amount of a male heir, e.g., a sister, would inherit one-half as much as her brother. In cases of divorce, children generally remain with the mother until age 13 for boys and 15 for girls, at which time custody reverts to the husband's family, regardless of the mother's religion.

Criminal law is based on the principles of sharia. The type of crime determines whether those convicted receive a sharia-based sentence.

There are certain criminal charges, such as alcohol consumption and extramarital sex, for which Muslims are subject to punishment according to sharia principles, including court-ordered and applied flogging as punishment. Sharia-based punishments may also apply to non-Muslims in these cases. Muslim convicts may earn a sentence reduction of a few months by memorizing the Quran while imprisoned. Secular law covers dispute resolution for financial service companies. The law approves implementing the Shia interpretation of sharia upon the agreement and request of the parties involved in the dispute.

According to the penal code, all individuals regardless of religious affiliation seen eating or drinking during daylight hours during Ramadan are subject to a fine of 3,000 riyals (\$800), three months' imprisonment, or both.

By law, a deceased person must be either buried within the country or the body repatriated to the home country. The law does not permit cremation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The government submitted documents to the United Nations in 2018 and made a formal statement in its treaty accession document that the government shall interpret Article 18.2 of the ICCPR (“No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice”) “based on the understanding that it does not contravene Islamic sharia” and that the government would reserve the right to implement Article 18.2 in accordance with its understanding of sharia. The government also formally stated in its accession document that it would interpret several other provisions of the ICCPR in line with sharia, including Article 27 (regarding the rights of minorities “to profess and practice their own religion”). The government made a formal reservation against being bound by gender equality provisions in Article 3 and Article 23.4 regarding family law and inheritance.

## **Government Practices**

### **Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression**

On March 20, the Baha'i International Community, which represents the worldwide Baha'i Community, issued a statement addressed to the UN Human Rights Council and reminding Qatari authorities "of their obligations to guarantee the rights of all to freely practice the religion of their choice without any fear of punishment." Making reference to the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief's emphasis on the role of the state in protecting the rights of religious minorities, the Baha'i International Community wrote that "Qatar is slowly pursuing a number of actions which will ultimately lead to the eradication of one of its religious minorities from society: the members of the Baha'i Faith, many of whom were born in Qatar and whose families have been there for generations." According to the statement, "many Baha'is find out that they have been blacklisted when they seek to renew their residency permits or try to obtain a certificate of good conduct in order to change jobs" and, "in reality, their only 'crime' is their belief in the Baha'i Faith!" The statement mentions the Baha'i International Community's repeated but failed attempts to meet with government authorities.

### **Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others**

On October 24, the CESCR raised concerns regarding reports in the country of government discrimination against religious minorities, including Baha'is. Seree Nonthasoot, a committee expert and country rapporteur, emphasized that the government did not recognize the religion and did not allow it to register in the country. According to CESCR, members of the Baha'i Faith had been subjected to administrative deportation and blacklisting, resulting in loss of employment and familial separation. Nanthasoot asked what concrete steps the government would take to reform the law that requires registration of non-Muslim religious groups as well as how it would address violations of such groups' economic, social, and cultural rights. The Qatari delegation replied that the state did not consider religion when determining whether to provide residency or not. No persons of the Baha'i or any other



faith were deported unless they unlawfully stayed in the country, members of the delegation said.

The CCSC, also representing evangelical house churches, known as “villa churches,” continued to submit written requests and updates to government officials to discuss issues related to its congregants and to advocate for increased space for the large number of parishioners. During the year, the CCSC held occasional meetings with the MFA.

In November, the government gave permission to the Evangelical Church Alliance in Qatar (ECAQ) to build a church at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex, also known as “Church City” and located on government-owned land, allocating a plot of land for construction of the church. Sixty villa churches were registered with the Ministry of Interior as worshipping under ECAQ’s umbrella.

During the year, the government reiterated it would consider requests from nonregistered religious groups to acquire a place of worship if they applied to register but, as in previous years, it said none had done so. Members of the Hindu community stated they were largely pleased that there was no government interference in the community’s private expressions of faith; however, they said they would like a formally recognized place of Hindu worship.

The MEIA continued to hire Sunni and Shia clerics and assign them to specific mosques. The ministry continued to provide, on an ad hoc basis, thematic guidance for Friday sermons, focusing mainly on Islamic rituals and social values, with clear restrictions against using pulpits to express political views or to attack other faiths. The ministry reviewed the content of all sermons but did not require clerics to obtain prior approval of their sermons. The government reserved the right to take judicial action, ranging from counseling to suspension or dismissal, of individuals who did not follow the guidance. Representatives of the Islamic Cultural Center in Doha (Fonar Mosque) reported they provided some points on Islamic teaching on the dignity of persons with disabilities for sermons.

According to the MEIA, as of 2021 (the latest figure available), there were approximately 2,300 mosques in the country. Government officials estimated as many as 10 of these were Shia mosques, although online sources stated the number was closer to 15. Officials stated the MEIA did not allow foreign funding for the building or upkeep of Shia mosques or other community facilities.

The MEIA continued to remind the public during Ramadan of its view of the correct way for Muslims to perform their religious duties. There were again no reports of arrests or fines during the year for violation of the penal code's ban on eating or drinking in public during daylight hours in Ramadan. All restaurants not located in hotels were required to close in daylight hours during Ramadan. Food delivery services remained available during daylight hours during Ramadan, and restaurants in some international hotels were open to foreigners, who were permitted to eat in private spaces out of public visibility.

According to members of the Hindu community, because the law did not permit cremation, which Hinduism traditionally requires within 24 hours of a death, funeral rites, called *antyeesti*, were difficult to arrange.

The government-sponsored Islamic Center of Doha (Fonar Masjid) offered religious and cultural educational programming to Muslims and non-Muslims on Islam and Qatari practices of Islam, featuring displays on the importance of tolerance.

On April 12, local news outlet *The Peninsula* reported the religious website Islamweb was affiliated with the MEIA and celebrated 25 years of operations "as the first Arab portal to introduce Islam, its heritage, culture and civilization at the global level." Humanists International stated in its Freedom of Thought Report on Qatar that Islamweb "promotes the Salafi literalist school of Sunni-Islam, a radical interpretation of Islam considered incompatible with the promotion of co-existence. Between its establishment (by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs) in 1998 and 2019, the site

provided 245,000 Fatwas (religious decrees by scholars, based on interpretations of religious text) ...Fatwa NR 8520 on apostasy says that apostates from Islam are to be killed after being offered a chance to return to Islam.” Sources, stated, however, that this fatwa was not part of Qatari legislation and was not practiced in the country.

According to IMPACT-se, notwithstanding some improvements in Qatar’s national curriculum and certain textbooks during the 2021-2022 school year, during 2023, the national curriculum continued to include content that was antisemitic in nature. During the year, some events at public schools featured antisemitic content, either from adults or students. The public Talha bin Obaidullah Preparatory School posted a photograph on its Facebook account from its “Gaza in Our Hearts” art exhibition, showing a student display entitled “The Attributes of the Jews,” characterizing Jews as “corrupt, murderers of prophets, deceitful, and arrogant.” On November 8, another public school posted on its X account (formerly known as Twitter) a two-minute clip of an imam leading students in prayers against the Jews, calling them the enemies of Allah.

Although the law prohibits Christian groups from advertising religious services, Christian churches continued to post hours of services and other information on publicly accessible websites; however, the government continued to prohibit them from publishing such information in local newspapers or on public bulletin boards. Church leaders and religious groups said individuals habitually practiced self-censorship when expressing religious views online and relied mostly on word of mouth, church websites, social media platforms, and email newsletters to distribute information about religious groups’ activities.

The government maintained its policy of reviewing, censoring, or banning newspapers, magazines, books, and social media for “objectionable” religious content, such as an attack on Islamic values or depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. The government-controlled internet service provider, Ooredoo, censored religious internet content through a proxy server that monitored and blocked websites, email, and voice over internet protocol

platforms, including Skype and FaceTime. Journalists and publishers said they continued to practice self-censorship due to political or economic pressures regarding material the government might consider denigrating to Islam.

The Mesaymeer Religious Complex continued to provide worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations, with clear government instructions that Christian symbols such as crosses, steeples, and statues were not permitted on the exterior of church buildings. The Anglican Center within the Mesaymeer Religious Complex housed several other smaller denominations and offered space to 88 congregations of different denominations and languages.

According to church leaders, approximately 100,000 expatriate Christians continued to attend weekly services at the Mesaymeer Religious Complex. Representatives of the CCSC reported overcrowding in seven buildings in the complex, and they noted difficulties with parking, access, and time-sharing of worship space. In addition to the permanent buildings, the government allowed the churches to erect tents during Easter and Christmas outside the primary complex to accommodate additional congregants. The government continued to enforce strict security measures at the complex, including closing parking lots, setting a curfew on church access, using metal detectors, and x-raying bags. Ministry of Interior security personnel asked churchgoers to show identification at the gates because non-Christians, whether expatriates or citizens, were prohibited access to the complex. The government continued its ban on worship outside the complex.

The CCSC continued to report that Christian clergy were allowed to visit members of their congregations when they were hospitalized and to conduct monthly trips to both male and female prisons to meet with incarcerated Christians.

The government continued its prohibition of the slaughter of animals outside of licensed facilities, a measure it said was intended to ensure

hygienic conditions. In practice, individuals were able to conduct ritual slaughter in private.

At year's end, there were several local cemeteries for Muslims and one for all non-Muslims. The Baha'i Faith community also reportedly maintained its own cemetery.

Church leaders again reported the government limited their ability to collect and distribute funds for charity, including through restrictions on the number and type of bank accounts churches could hold, as well as through reporting requirements on donors and on contractors doing business with churches. Some smaller unregistered churches reportedly used the personal accounts of religious leaders for church activities.

For the first time, the government officially permitted Jewish religious services to occur other than in a private residence. In September, a visiting rabbi provided Yom Kippur services in a public space for members of the Jewish community.

The country continued to host the headquarters of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS), a group widely viewed in the press and academia as being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni transnational organization that promotes political Islam. Although the IUMS stated it was an independent association of scholars, observers said its close relationship with the government helped it to serve as an instrument of the country's soft power.

On May 9-11, DICI, along with U.S.-based NGO Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, hosted an invitation-only conference with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish clergy, laymen, and government officials to discuss "moving from interfaith dialogue to concrete interfaith cooperation." Representatives of the MFA Human Rights Department, the MEIA, and other ministries participated. Unlike during the 2022 DICI conference, organizers scheduled formal speaking opportunities for local religious leaders, including from minority Christian communities.

In early December, the government invited Doha-based Christian leaders from the CCSC to join the Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) on a humanitarian mission in Rafah to provide aid to Palestinians in Gaza, and as what they stated was a means to promote respect for religious diversity in Qatar. Minister of State for International Cooperation Lolwah al-Khater coordinated with leaders of the Maronite and Greek Orthodox Churches and QFFD, across faiths, to bring essential food supplies from Qatar.

According to the *Middle East Monitor*, in November, the government, banned the Indian film *Tiger 3*, reportedly over concerns Muslims were portrayed in a negative light.

### **Abuses Involving Discrimination or Unequal Treatment**

During the year, representatives of the Baha'i Faith community reported they were experiencing increased government intimidation. A Baha'i community leader stated that several Baha'i foreign residents were denied security clearances or certificates of good conduct by the government when offered new jobs and indicated that they believed this was because of their religious beliefs. Another was fired from his job without notice. Many said they had to leave the country, with one Baha'i characterizing the government's actions towards this group as "economic strangulation." Members of the Baha'i Faith community said they continued to seek internal lines of communication with the government to resolve tension but were unable to meet with government officials during the year.

In May, the MFA hosted a one-day international symposium on Islamophobia in Doha.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

During the year, hotels, and restaurants organized celebrations for Christmas, Diwali, and other non-Islamic holidays, although they were often advertised as festivals or festive season celebrations, rather than religious holidays.

Cartoons, opinion articles, and certain news coverage in local newspapers and other media outlets periodically carried antisemitic content, which increased following the Hamas October 7 attack on Israel and Israel's response in Gaza, according to media reports, the ADL, and other organizations. The ADL reported numerous cartoons published in Qatari news outlets, one an illustration of a Jewish Pinocchio-type figure wearing a kippah and entitled, *The Lie of Zionist Media*. Another cartoon entitled *Shifa Hospital* featured a star of David-studded serpent feasting on something in a bloodied baby carriage, an image reminiscent of antisemitic blood libel accusations. Local newspaper *Al Sharq* published a poem on November 1 by poet Ali al-Mas'oudi that referred to Jews "as apes and swine who are innately deceptive and will be defeated."

In its *World Watch List* covering 2023, the Christian NGO Open Doors USA stated, "Most Christians are expatriate believers. They tend to be migrant workers and enjoy a degree of religious freedom. Large worship events have been allowed in the past, but a major issue remains a shortage of space for churches, with only a select number allowed to establish buildings at the official religious complex outside the capital, Doha. Foreign Christians must be very careful when sharing their faith, as evangelizing Muslims is strictly forbidden and can lead to prosecution and deportation. Christians who come from Muslim backgrounds are heavily persecuted... They are considered apostates and face discrimination and harassment from society and even risk being killed by their family."

In September, Georgetown University-Qatar hosted a two-day conference in Doha on confronting Islamophobia.

## **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

During the year, embassy officials met with senior government officials and relevant government bodies as well as with quasigovernmental religious institutions concerning the rights of religious minorities, Sunni-Shia relations, and antisemitism. In May, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom participated in the DICIP conference, alongside two previous Ambassadors at Large. He also met with the MEIA, the MFA, and religious minority community leaders to discuss the status of religious freedom in country, hear about the successes and challenges religious minorities face, and express U.S. support for religious tolerance to government officials.

During Ramadan, the Ambassador hosted a suhoor bringing together Muslim, Christian, and Jewish representatives.

The Ambassador used his social media accounts to promote tolerance and religious freedom, including recognizing “the Jewish community who celebrated Rosh Hashanah...on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar...back home in the United States, or anywhere else in the world.”

In September, the embassy liaised with the MFA to facilitate Jewish holiday services in Doha in a hotel meeting space.

Throughout the year, embassy officials met with representatives of the Baha’i Faith community to discuss ongoing concerns such as reports of discrimination, including arrests and deportations, of members of the Baha’i Faith community, lack of freedom to worship, and legal cases. Embassy representatives also met with the CCSC to discuss issues of mutual concern, such as increasing communication with the government and a lack of authorized worship space. Embassy officers also met with members of the Hindu, Jewish, and Christian communities and discussed issues, including those affecting religious rites, holidays, and worship space, as well as interest in increasing positive interaction with the government.