

QATAR 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states Islam is the state religion and sharia shall be “a main source” of legislation. It guarantees the freedom to practice religious rites in accordance with “the maintenance of public order and morality.” The law recognizes only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism; non-Abrahamic religious groups had no legal mechanism to register or establish official houses of worship. The law provides for prison sentences for blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism and criminalizes proselytizing on behalf of any religion other than Islam. The government allowed members of unregistered religious groups to worship privately and permitted eight registered Christian denominations to worship publicly at the Mesaymir Religious Complex. In October the Evangelical Churches Alliance Qatar (ECAQ) broke ground on the country’s first new church in several years. In February government-owned Qatar TV transmitted a live broadcast of a Friday sermon read by a Saudi cleric which included anti-Semitic remarks; the government subsequently refused further requests by the same cleric to preach in the country. While the government continued to monitor print and social media for religious material it considered objectionable, journalists reportedly practiced self-censorship to remove material the government could consider hostile to Islam.

In May a crowd of Indian nationals at a local mall assaulted another Indian for allegedly posting comments hostile to Islam on a social media site. The government investigated the incident and reportedly took steps to defuse tensions. Members of some noncitizen resident communities harassed other members of those communities for posting anti-Islamic sentiments on the internet. Some privately owned newspapers continued to publish anti-Semitic political cartoons.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers met with government officials to discuss restrictions on places of worship and the potential for government decrees to inhibit religious freedom. Embassy officers met with quasi-governmental organizations and with representatives of religious groups to discuss the needs of religious communities and the importance of interfaith cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population as 2.2 million (July 2015 estimate). Citizens make up approximately 10.5 percent of the population, while

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noncitizens account for 89.5 percent. Including citizens and noncitizens, estimates suggest Muslims make up more than 41 percent of the total population. Almost all citizens (approximately 90 percent according to estimates) are Sunni Muslims, with almost all of the remaining portion Shia Muslims. The breakdown of the noncitizen population between Sunni, Shia, and other Muslim groups is not available.

Estimates of the noncitizen Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist communities are provided by Christian groups and local embassies. The Hindu community, almost exclusively from India and Nepal, comprises approximately 30 percent of the total population. Roman Catholics make up approximately 18 percent of the total population, while Buddhists, largely from South, Southeast, and East Asia, account for approximately 6 percent of the total population. Groups constituting approximately 5 percent of the total population include Anglicans, Egyptian Copts, Bahais of Iranian or Lebanese origin, and members of the Greek and other Eastern Orthodox Churches.

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. 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. According to the constitution, the emir must be a Muslim.

Conversion to another religion from Islam is defined by the law as apostasy and is a capital offense, 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 defaming, desecrating, or committing blasphemy against Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The law stipulates a one-year prison term or a fine of 1,000 Qatari riyals (QR) (\$275) 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 a potential punishment of up to six months in prison.

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The law does not recognize religions other than Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. To obtain an official presence in the country, Christian groups must apply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) consular affairs department for legal registration. For registration, a denomination must have at least 1,500 members in the country. Registered groups may hold bank accounts in the organization's name and may apply for property to build worship space. Unregistered churches are illegal, according to the law, as is the practice of non-Abrahamic faiths. Unregistered groups may be disbanded and their members may be deported.

The law restricts public worship. 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 proselytizing on behalf of an organization, society, or foundation of any religion other than Islam and provides for punishments of up to 10 years in prison. Proselytizing on one's own accord for any religion other than Islam can result in a sentence of up to five years. The law calls for two years' imprisonment and a fine of QR 10,000 (\$2,746) 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 law designates the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs as the final authority for approving Islamic religious centers. Non-Islamic houses of worship are approved by the MFA in coordination with the private office of the emir.

While a non-Muslim woman is not required by law to convert to Islam when marrying a Muslim, the law considers offspring of such a marriage to be Muslims.

Islamic instruction is compulsory for Muslims attending state-sponsored schools. Muslim children may attend secular and coeducational private schools. Non-Muslims may provide private religious instruction for their children. All children may attend secular private schools.

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. A judicial panel for Shia Muslims decides cases regarding

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marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other domestic matters utilizing Shia interpretations of religious law. In other religious matters, the country's 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.

In matters involving religious issues, judges have discretion to apply either Shia or Sunni legal interpretations depending on the affiliation of the parties in the case. There are certain criminal cases, such as drunkenness, in which Muslims are tried and punished under sharia. 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 Charities Commission must approve all religious charitable activities in advance.

Government Practices

New religious groups, especially small groups, said they continued to have difficulties gaining or maintaining registration, particularly because of the requirement a group demonstrate it had over 1,500 members, and because of bureaucratic inefficiencies in the MFA. Religious leaders stated the inability to register made it difficult for religious groups to conduct financial activity. The government continued to bar non-Abrahamic religious groups from registering.

The government maintained an official register of previously approved Christian denominations, including the Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Lebanese Maronite, Filipino Evangelical, and Indian Christian churches.

According to representatives of religious groups, the government maintained its view of members of religious groups other than Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as transient members of the community not requiring permanent religious clergy or facilities. The government continued to permit adherents of unrecognized religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Bahai Faith, and small Christian congregations, to worship privately in their homes, workplaces, and with others.

The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs reported it continued to hire clerics and assign them to specific mosques. It continued to provide thematic

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guidance for Friday sermons and reviewed content but did not require clerics to obtain prior approval of their sermons. Although the government reserved the right to take judicial action against individuals who did not follow the guidance, there were no reported instances of the government doing so, reportedly because clerics adhered to the guidance.

As in past years, the government issued a decree during Ramadan describing its view on the correct way for individuals to perform their religious duties as Muslims. The emir again personally financed the Hajj for some citizen and noncitizen pilgrims who could not otherwise afford to travel to Mecca.

The MFA-led permanent intergovernmental committee continued to address the concerns of non-Muslim religious groups, including legal incorporation and sponsorship of religious leaders.

While the government maintained its policy of reviewing foreign newspapers, magazines, and books for “objectionable” religious content, journalists and publishers reportedly continued to practice self-censorship regarding material the government could consider hostile to Islam. Sources said the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs continued to censor or ban texts on Shia Islam, or those sympathetic to Da’esh (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) or proselytizing religions other than Islam.

The government continued to permit non-Muslim religious groups and individuals to import holy books and other religious items for personal or congregational use.

Hindus, Buddhists, Bahais, and other unrecognized religious groups continued to lack authorized facilities in which to practice their religions. The Mesaymir Religious Complex known as “Church City” continued to provide worship space for the eight registered Christian denominations. The government allowed unregistered churches to worship there as well, but only under the patronage of one of the eight recognized denominations.

Christian leaders continued to report government efforts to facilitate the construction of new worship space, provide security, and improve infrastructure in Mesaymir. In October Evangelical Churches Alliance Qatar (ECAQ) broke ground on construction of the first new church since 2013 after the government approved allocation of the land in June.

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The government reportedly maintained its policy of not enforcing nondiscrimination laws, although sources said there had been no cases of litigation involving religious discrimination to test the policy.

The government prohibited the slaughter of animals outside of licensed facilities, a measure it said was designed to ensure hygienic conditions for slaughter. In practice, individuals were able to conduct ritual slaughter in private. For example, Nepali Hindus reported they were able to perform sacrifices in housing accommodations.

In February government-owned Qatar TV transmitted a live broadcast of a Friday sermon delivered by Saudi cleric Sa'ad Ateeq al-Ateeq in which he prayed for Jews to be killed. The cleric's sermon reportedly was not government-written and the government did not permit him to give a sermon in the country after February.

For a second year in a row, there were no reported instances of the government censoring the expression of peaceful religious views on the internet. Church leaders and other religious groups said online commentators practiced self-censorship and relied instead on word of mouth and email newsletters to distribute information.

While proselytizing remained punishable by up to five years in prison, the government's policy continued to be to deport foreigners suspected of proselytizing without formal legal proceedings.

Church leaders stated their ability to collect and distribute funds for charity continued to be limited by the government's restrictions on the number and type of bank accounts churches could hold, as well as reporting requirements on contractors doing business with the churches and on donors. Some smaller, unregistered churches continued to use personal accounts of religious leaders for church activities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In May local and international media reported a crowd of Indian residents had assaulted another Indian man at a local mall for allegedly posting comments hostile to Islam on a social media site. The government reportedly investigated and issued statements condemning the incident. It also organized meetings within the Indian community in an effort to defuse tensions.

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There were reports of individuals experiencing harassment, both in person and online, for expressing anti-Islamic sentiments online.

Approximately once every few months, privately owned Arabic-language newspapers, including *al-Watan*, *al-Sharq*, *al-Arab*, and *al-Raya*, continued to carry political cartoons depicting caricatures of Jews and Jewish symbols.

The quasi-governmental Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID) hosted discussions on the freedom to worship within one's home and how religious tolerance can be a means of resolving intercommunal strife.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy officers, and visiting Department of State officials met with government officials to discuss restrictions on the number, type, and location of places of worship and the potential for government religious decrees – for example, the decree on how individuals should celebrate Ramadan – to inhibit religious freedom. The embassy held similar discussions with quasi-governmental organizations such as the Qatar Foundation. The embassy facilitated contacts between religious leaders and the government. Embassy officers met with representatives of religious groups to discuss the needs of their communities, such as for more worship space, their perspective on the government's approach to religious tolerance, and the importance of interfaith cooperation.